

# キノの旅 VII

the Beautiful World

時雨沢恵

KEIICHI SUGAWA

イラスト ● 黒星紅白

ILLUSTRATION KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI





Kino no Tabi  
-the Beautiful World-  
vol. VII

by Keiichi Sigsawa

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To live is sadness.

To be alive is not.

-I am alive.-













私がキノと名乗る旅人と出会ったのは、  
まだ私が生まれた国に住んでいた頃、  
私が十一歳の時だ。

その時私はなんて呼ばれていたのか、実はもう覚えていない。

何か花の名前で、読み方を少し変えると、

とてもいやな悪口になっていたことだけはぼんやりと覚えている。

よくそれでからかわれたから。





When I met the traveler named Kino,

I was still living in the country of my birth.

I was eleven years old.

To be honest, I don't remember what my name was back then.

I recall I was named for a flower,

Because if you changed around the pronunciation a little, it turned into a nasty insult,

And I used to get made fun of for it.















# Prologue: To Do Something ▪ B -Life goes on ▪ B-

“Welcome back, Kino,” said the old woman in front of the little cabin in the forest.

Before her was Kino, riding on Hermes. Kino turned off the engine, propped up Hermes on his side stand, and opened her coat.

“I was just about expecting you. Welcome home.”

Kino walked up to the old woman. “I’m home, Master.”

The evening sky was still glowing with the light of dusk. Night was spreading quickly in the east. Kino and the old woman stood side-by-side on the cabin terrace, looking up at the sky.

Some time passed in silence before Kino took off her hat and goggles.

“I see you’ve gotten a haircut,” said the old woman. Kino ran a hand through her slightly messy hair.

“Yes. I like it this way.”

“It suits you very much. I like it too.”

“Same,” Hermes said from below.

Kino reached for the holster on her right thigh and drew a persuader. She held it by the barrel and handed it to the old woman by the grip. “Thank you for lending it to me.”

The old woman gently received it and checked that it was fully loaded. “You’re welcome.” Then she stuck it on the left side of her own belt like it was the most natural thing in the world. “Did you do what you had to do?” she asked with a smile.

“Yes,” Kino said. “But...now what? What should I do now?”



The old woman replied, “That’s a question only you can answer.”

Still wearing her coat, still standing on the terrace, Kino fell into thought. Soon she looked up at the old woman.

“Master. I want to become strong, if I can.”

“Wonderful. I can teach you how. What do you say?”

“Yes, please. And also...”

“Yes?”

“Please tell me about your travels. More about them, I mean.”

The old woman nodded again and again. “Of course. You do seem to love those stories of mine, Kino. Have I told you the one about the mountain country, where the leader ran away because he didn’t want to serve anymore?”

Kino shook her head.

“Well,” the old woman began, walking inside.

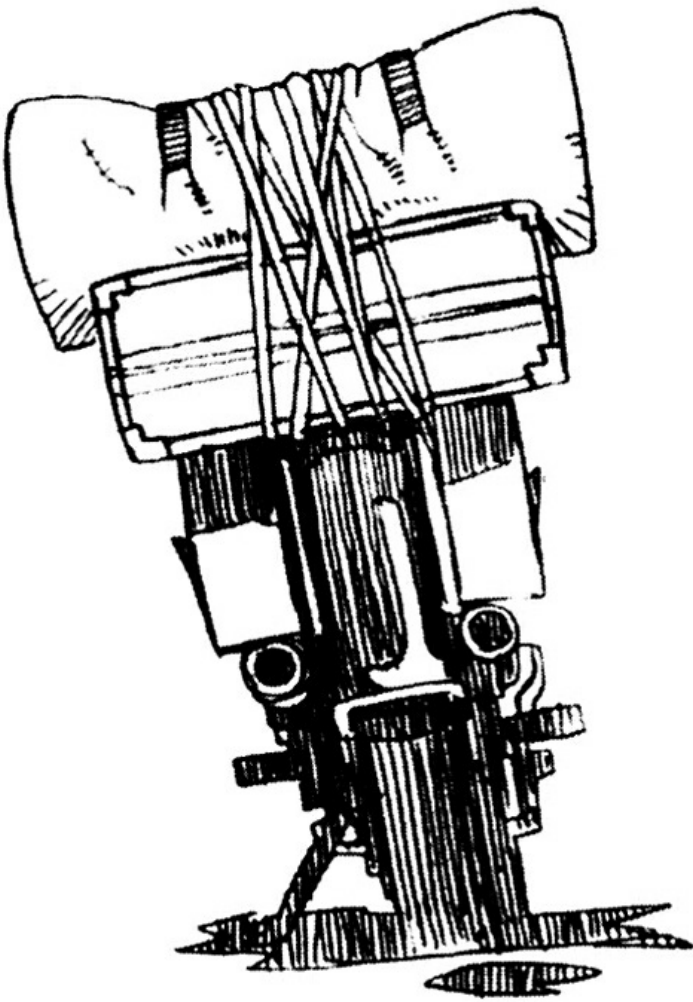
“Please tell me the story,” Kino said, following her in.

Hermes watched them in silence.

And once they had disappeared—

“Huh? Wait, take me with you!”











# Chapter 1: The Country that Causes Trouble - Leave Only Footsteps!-

A motorrad was propped up next to the creek, its luggage rack fully laden with travel gear.

The creek was narrow enough for a child to hop across. It cut across the flat plain at an unhurried pace.

The plain was situated between two mountain ranges.

The rugged stone mountains on the north and south went on as far as the eye could see. Their peaks were still capped with snow.

The vast, flat plain between was green with trees and plants, adding a dash of color to the monochromatic world.

Across the creek from the motorrad was its rider. She sat on the grass with her feet forward and hands supporting her as she looked into the sky. Overhead was a warm spring sun and several clumps of clouds.

The rider was in her mid-teens with short black hair and fair features. She wore a black jacket, a thick belt, and a holstered hand persuader secured around her thigh. Behind her back was a second persuader, an automatic model.

"Phew," the rider sighed, looking up.

"Well, Kino?" asked the motorrad. "Have you decided?"

Kino shook her head. "No. I haven't."

"Then what?" the motorrad asked.

Kino rose with a standoffish look, shaking herself off. Blades of grass fluttered to the ground. "For now, Hermes..." she began, going up to the motorrad. She opened one of the compartments hanging off either side of his rear wheel and pulled out what looked like a long, wound rope.

"Well?" asked Hermes.

Kino picked up her hat off his luggage rack and went to the nearest pair of trees.

“I’m going to try and think of something by...”

“By?”

“Sleeping.”

“What?”

Kino unfolded the object in her hands—a net hammock. She hung up either end on either one of the trees and unfastened the holster behind her back.

Without a word, she stared at the persuader. This model had a rectangular barrel, which was almost completely exposed even when holstered. Kino called it ‘Woodsman’.

She put on the holster again, this time over her stomach.

“The weather’s nice, and it’s warm. I don’t see any harm in napping.”

Careful not to let the hammock flip over, Kino sat in the middle and pulled up her feet. The hammock shook slightly and stopped.

“I’m counting on you, Hermes,” she said, covering her face with her hat.

“I don’t believe this,” Hermes groaned. Kino was already fast asleep.

Near the creek was a small puddle. The little pool of water framed a tiny piece of the sky’s reflection.

The reflection trembled. Small ripples came together at the center of the puddle. The sky shook.

“Kino!” Hermes yelled.

Kino fell from her hammock, making a controlled landing on her hands. She lay on her stomach in the grass, her hat falling next to her. “What’s happening?” she whispered, scanning her surroundings.

“The ground’s shaking,” Hermes said matter-of-factly.

“Really?” A moment’s confusion later, Kino fell silent. And she furrowed her brow. “I don’t feel anything.”

Picking up her hat, Kino shook off the dirt and grass from her clothes. She placed a hand on the persuader at her side. "Is it an earthquake?"

"No. You can feel the tremor getting stronger."

"What does it mean, then?" Kino wondered.

"Something's coming."

Kino turned to the southwest. Nothing was out of place.

"Like what?" she asked.

"Dunno," Hermes replied.

The answer soon drew near.

"You're right, Hermes. I can feel it too," Kino said, eyes locked on the ripples on the puddle. Hermes urged her to look at the forest to the east.

Kino rose, turning. And she spotted the source of the tremors.

A country.

A country like any other, surrounded by towering grey walls. There were no gaps in the walls, but otherwise they were completely ordinary.

"It's coming."

But the country was moving. Kino stared in awe at the east.

The tops of the walls emerged and disappeared several times past the treetops. And slowly but surely, it came closer. The tremors grew stronger.

"Mystery solved," Hermes declared.

"Yeah," Kino replied. "But what in the world is that thing?" she wondered, eyes wide.

"Probably a country," Hermes said nonchalantly. "It's going to run us over if you don't move."

"Right."

The moving country was headed straight in their direction. Kino could hear something like a low wind. She scrambled to take down her hammock, roll it up, and put it back into its compartment. She put on her hat and goggles and

started Hermes. They made their way to the right side of the country, trying to avoid it, but Kino stopped right next to its projected route.

She observed the walls from up close.

The walls went around in a large circle, and were topped with guard towers at regular intervals. The country was not very large—she could go all the way around it on foot if she wanted. But it was moving, with a deep, thunderous roar that echoed from the distance.

Kino slowly raised her head and her voice. “Wow. A moving country... I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Yeah,” Hermes agreed. “Well? Want to ask for a ride?”

Kino looked at him. “You might be on to something, Hermes.”

“What if they start shooting at us?”

“It’ll be a gamble. But let’s give it a shot. Right now, this country’s our best chance.”

Stepping out of the shadows of the trees, Kino waved at the passing country.

The country drew even nearer, snapping trees under its house-sized caterpillar tracks. Trunks turned to chips under the weight.

Soon, the country was covering part of the sky, cutting off Kino from the sun and casting a shadow over her.

“It’s like a moving mountain,” Hermes muttered.

That was when, amidst the deafening noise, a male voice spoke.

“Are you a traveler?”

The voice seemed to come from right next to Kino. She looked around, surprised.

“Ah, pardon me. I’m speaking from inside the country. Let me ask again: are you a traveler? Are you seeking entry into our country?”

Kino waved again. The man responded.

“Then please wait a moment.”

Soon, the noise and tremors began to die down. As Kino and Hermes watched, the country came to a stop with a loud thud.

Kino and Hermes stood before a set of gates at the front of the country. They swung outwards and were thick and heavy enough to dig into the ground. Inside was a ramp that led into the country proper.

A small truck came down the ramp, engine whirring pleasantly. Inside was a nondescript man about forty years of age, wearing a button-down shirt, tie, and a light green work jacket.

“Good day, Traveler. I am a civil servant here. I serve as an immigrations officer, guide, police officer, and more. Civil servants have many different duties in our country, you see,” he said, stopping before Kino and Hermes.

“Er...is this a country?” Kino asked, after introducing herself. “Where are you going?”

The guide nodded. “Yes, this is a country. My fellows and I live peaceful lives inside, always on the move. We’re currently headed west down the plains.”

As was her usual custom, Kino asked if she could visit the country for tourism purposes.

The guide granted her permission wholeheartedly, exclaiming that visitors were always welcome. “How long will you be staying?”

Kino looked at Hermes, and turned back to the guide. “Five to ten days.”

“Look over there, Kino. Our country’s engine. We use steam generators to produce electricity, which powers the caterpillar tracks and our day-to-day activities inside,” the guide explained, pointing at the massive device beyond a thick pane of glass.

Kino was in the passenger seat of the truck, and Hermes was secured to the back. The truck was stopped in the middle of a large road surrounded by walls and glass panes. The entire space was faintly trembling with a low roar.

The guide pointed at several monitors positioned above the glass windows. They displayed people working on the device, all dressed in clothes that covered their entire bodies.



“The engine is self-operating, so all we have to do is keep an eye on it. And one load of fuel lasts for centuries, which means we have no need to resort to backup power. We mostly keep busy maintaining and cleaning the caterpillar tracks and the motors. Now let’s be off, shall we?”

The truck started again. Kino asked, “How long have your people been living here?”

“Ah, are you curious about our history? Truth be told, we’re not sure. Maybe our ancestors happened across a moving structure and made it their home. Or maybe we’ve always been here and simply can’t remember. But since we have no way of knowing, we don’t worry ourselves about it too much.”

“Are you going to keep moving around like this? Not gonna settle down if you see a good place?” Hermes asked.

The guide gave two reasons for continuing to move with the country. “The first issue is with our engine system. Once it stops completely, it takes too much effort and energy to start it again. Not only that, if we stop moving for a long period of time, the energy—the heat—that would have been used to power our movements would build up in the system. That is why we always consume the energy by continuing to move, if only at a walking pace.”

“I see.” “Hm.”

The guide smiled. “The other reason might be familiar to you. We love seeing new things and visiting different places. Our entire country is traveling together, in one sense.”

“That sounds wonderful. Do you have a course planned out?”

“No. But we’re always moving across the continent. Sometimes through deserts and sometimes through fields, and even through mountains, in spite of all the difficulties. We almost never visit the same place twice, at least not in living memory. We are always on the move.”

The truck continued down the road, which emerged into the country proper. Two-lane streets crisscrossed the country, dotted by crossings and signals.

The truck made a U-turn onto an incline. At the top of the slope was a blindingly bright exit that led to the very top of the country. A round, green area

surrounded by low walls. It was a large park, complete with dirt, grass, and forests. Some of the trees were big enough to be well over a hundred years old. Kino even spotted manmade creeks and a small lake.

The park was no different from any Kino had seen before. It was filled with people, whether strolling, exercising, napping on the grass, or enjoying a boat ride.

“Welcome to the top level. The only place in our country where you can enjoy real sunlight. It’s where our people come to rest. We try to uphold the spirit of equality here, which means even the president must live in the lower levels, which don’t receive any sunlight. We do have windows to look out of, though.”

“I see.”

The truck continued upwards, this time to the road that made up the top of the walls. The road was narrow but lined with short, sturdy guardrails. To their left was the green park, and far below to their right was the green plain.

“Must be hard to live here if you’re afraid of heights.” Hermes said.

The truck soon reached the east side of the wall, at the back of the country.

“Wow.” “Amazing,” Kino and Hermes exclaimed. The country had left a clear trail behind it to the east.

The caterpillar tracks had left deep marks in the ground. Trees and plants were pummeled into the earth. The ground had been churned. A thick brown line of tracks led into the distance, between the two mountain ranges on the north and south.

“This is one thing we can’t help,” the guide said remorsefully. “It pains us to leave such destruction in our wake. And we know that we are harming nature through our travels. But isn’t it the same with a person traveling on his own? Each step leaves behind a footprint. We can’t change that fact. All we can do is hope that new trees and grass will spring up in this land someday.”

The room was small but tidy.

It was furnished with a bed, dresser, nightstand, folding chair, and table. Everything was bolted to the floor.

Not a single window adorned the wall. A large screen was displaying the world outside, half dedicated to daytime and the other half a live feed of the sunset outside.

Hermes was parked at the entrance, and took up about half the space in the room. He was on his side stand and secured down with a belt for good measure. He was completely spotless.

Kino stepped out of a door on the side, wearing a set of blue pajamas labeled with the number 41. She gave her hair a cursory wipe and hung her towel around her neck, and sat on the edge of her mattress.

"I don't remember the last time I could use all the hot water I wanted."

"Yeah, but they recycle it all. You might end up drinking your shower water tomorrow," Hermes warned.

"I don't mind. Better than filtering muddy river water for tea."

"That's true. Where'd you get the pajamas?"

"They let me borrow them. And all the towels I needed, too."

"Huh," Hermes replied. At that moment, the room began to shake like in a mild earthquake. "You think we ran over a rock, Kino? ...Oh, it stopped. I guess they crushed it."

"I still can't believe we're moving."

Kino hung up her towel and took out Woodsman from its hiding place under the pillow. Pulling it out of its holster, she stared at it for some time. Then Kino put it back.

"You think things'll work out?"

"We'll find out in a few days. For now, I just want to sleep."

Kino lay down in bed and pulled up her sheets.

"Wait, Kino."

"Save it for tomorrow, Hermes. Good night," Kino said, and added, "What was it again...? 'Power', 'Full shutdown'."

The lights and the screen all turned off in unison.

“A clean bed...white sheets...” Kino mumbled in the dark, and fell asleep.

The next morning, Kino woke up and turned on the lights and the screen. The live feed showed a forest lit by the light of dawn, and the mountain range to the south.

“Good morning, Kino,” Hermes said.

“You’re up early, Hermes. Did you sleep well?” Kino replied, heading to the bathroom.

Hermes said, “About what I was going to tell you last night—”

The moment Kino disappeared into the bathroom, she yelled.

“You know you’ll get really bad bed head if you don’t dry off before you sleep.”

“No work?”

“Nope. Machines do all the work here. And he even got angry and said they couldn’t make a visitor do work for them. He told me to just relax and take it easy.”

Kino and Hermes were under the blue sky. She pushed him to the park entrance and propped him up. Kino was wearing her usual jacket without her hat and goggles, having even removed her holstered persuader.

“Then I guess you have nothing to do. Take a nap, maybe?” Hermes asked. He was loaded with nothing.

“That sounds good.”

Kino pushed Hermes into the park.

Sunbathing locals spotted Kino and approached her. They explained that the news reported their arrival the previous night, and welcomed her to their country. The people were surprised to hear that Kino was traveling alone by motorrad, and encouraged her to get some rest during her stay.

Kino did as she was told and borrowed a folding chair. she lay down next to Hermes and watched the clouds pass by. Around lunchtime, food stands rose out of the ground. Kino ordered farm-grown vegetables and chicken.

After the delicious meal, children around ten years of age began gathering at the park entrance. Once a dozen or so children had arrived, they all disappeared into the walls with a chaperone.

Kino asked where the children were going. Someone replied, "They're going to paint a mural on the wall. It's a special event we hold for kids finishing primary school."

"Murals?"

"That's right. They go outside on a rig and all paint a big mural on the wall." The local added that Kino should go and see for herself.

"Are we going, Kino?"

"It's not like we have anything better to do. And it sounds interesting, too."

"All right. We won't need a truck to get up to the top of the wall, right?"

Kino started Hermes, left the park, and climbed up the ramp. The wind was a little stronger at the top of the wall.

About halfway around the country, on the north side of the walls, they spotted a large truck equipped with two cranes. The cranes were secured to the guardrails at the edge of the wall, and from them hung a long basket. Children wearing helmets and harnesses stood inside, looking both excited and nervous as they listened to their chaperone.

Kino asked a teacher for permission to observe, and stopped Hermes at the edge of the road. She secured him to the guardrails, and borrowed a safety harness for herself.

The children were slowly lowered along the walls. They took up large brushes and began to paint, following a large outline that had been set up earlier.

"I can't really tell what they're painting from up here," Kino said.

The teacher showed Kino and Hermes a screen displaying a feed from a camera set up just off the wall. The mural depicted large, snow-capped mountains with a tropical forest before it, and herds of wild animals. The animals were large enough to be life-sized. The children were almost finished, with only a bit of the outline still visible.



“The students decide on things that impressed them the most along the way during their time in primary school, and paint it together. It’s been four years since we passed by the area they’re painting now. It was very beautiful. Everyone just stood at the top of the walls, watching the world pass by for hours. The mural will be finished in a few more days. I remember when I was in primary school. We painted a large volcano we passed by in the desert.”

“What happens with finished murals?”

“We take photos of it, and coat it with a protective layer. The murals stay on the wall for 500 days, until the next batch of students leave primary school.”

“I see.”

Kino took a seat on Hermes and relaxed, watching the mural become complete.

Evening finally came, and the sun began to set.

Kino and Hermes watched the sun disappear into the forest between the mountain ranges, all from the comfort of their room.

The next day. It was the third day of their stay in the country.

Kino rose at dawn. The sky displayed on the screen was overcast, rainclouds almost bursting overhead. Hermes was channel surfing.

That was when a special news bulletin interrupted the broadcast. “Today’s mural-painting session has been put on hold,” it said, displaying a picture of the almost-complete mural. “In related news, the traveler currently staying with us seems to have taken quite the interest in our tradition.”

The screen showed footage of Kino and Hermes watching the children at work.

“When did they shoot that?” “Wow.”

As usual, Kino started off the day with light exercises. She then did persuader drills and maintenance. First up was Cannon, the revolver, and second was Woodsman, the automatic. Kino oiled, loaded, and holstered them one after the other.

Afterwards, she took out a rifle-type persuader she kept dismantled in her

suitcase. She put the two pieces together, maintained it, and checked that it was in working order.

“Are you going to need that?”

“Who knows?” Kino said, cleaning the lens of the scope before taking the persuader apart and putting it back in her case.

Kino showered and headed for a restaurant with Hermes. They found one just across the street. Passersby greeted them along the way.

At the restaurant, Kino propped up Hermes next to the table and secured him to the floor. Breakfast consisted mostly of vegetables, everything served in unnecessarily deep bowls that could be secured to platters. The platters could also be secured to the tables.

The civil servant who welcomed Kino to the country asked for permission to sit with her. He asked Kino how she liked the country, to which she responded honestly; the guide gave a cheerful laugh.

Kino and the guide relaxed over tea and rose from their seats when an alarm went off, screeching against their eardrums. Red lights on the walls lit up and began to spin.

“What’s happening?” “Is it a fire?” Kino and Hermes wondered.

“All citizens, to your designated locations! No running or pushing,” said the civil servant, carrying out his duties as a policeman. “Kino, Hermes. This warning means that we’ve spotted a country in our path. As a diplomat, I must head to the command center. Would you like to come and see?”

The alarm was soon replaced by relaxing music, and an announcement ordering all citizens to return to their residences.

Kino and Hermes were driven to a room labeled ‘Operations Command’. It was the bridge of the moving country they were aboard, with people seated at multi-level operating panels, and large monitors displaying the country’s surroundings.

Among the identical uniform jackets was an older woman in a soft chair. She looked at the civil servant—who now acted as a diplomat—and smiled. “You’re

here. I leave the rest to you. And good morning, Traveler. It's a pleasure to meet you. I am the president of this country. Don't let my presence bother you; make yourself at home."

Kino greeted the president, then took a seat and buckled herself in as instructed. Hermes was secured next to her.

They looked at the screens lined up in front of them. The smaller ones to the sides displayed the situation outside the walls, with some focused only on the murals. The largest of the screens, positioned at the very center, displayed the course straight ahead.

Like the previous two days, under the cloudy sky was the forest and the mountain ranges that sandwiched it. But this time, there was a country beyond the trees.

"This is...troublesome," said the guide, visibly surprised. "It certainly is," said the president.

The wall was made of stone, like with most other countries. However, it stood in a straight line instead of in a circle around the country. The wall began at the mountain range at the north and ended at the mountain range at the south. It blocked the plain like a dam.

"It seems that entry is forbidden," said the guide. The wall on the screen drew nearer.

The camera zoomed in towards the soldiers on the ramparts of the wall, scrambling to set up their cannons. An arrow on the screen stopped over them. The diplomat picked up a microphone and spoke to the men on the wall, requesting to speak to a superior if they had a radio.

A moment of static later, the radio transmission came in. A man identifying himself as a general demanded to know what the moving country was doing. The diplomat explained that his country was constantly on the move, saying, "We are currently headed westward. We would like to ask your permission to cross your country."

There was a brief pause, before the general replied that he could not grant entry.

"I knew it," Hermes muttered.

"But your wall is blocking off the plains entirely. Our country cannot go around it," said the guide.

The general replied that his country had toiled for years to expand their borders this far, and that it was not another country's business to interfere. He threatened to take any further approach as an attack on his country's territorial sovereignty.

"We have no intention of fighting a war. It will not help anyone. We simply ask you to let us through. Please show us a route through your country."

The general was furious. He howled that he would never allow the moving country through.

The diplomat turned to one of the people on the operating panels. "The dome. Prepare two cameras, one to the rear-left flank and the other inside."

A small monitor displaying the country interior showed the center of the country splitting open. From the gaps emerged several claw-like metal plates, which came together on top of the walls to form a giant protective dome.

The general on the wall responded, saying that their hand had been forced, and that they would resort to violence in order to protect their own country. He followed up with an official declaration of war, which was immediately followed by a volley of cannon fire.

"This is troublesome," the diplomat muttered, as the screens displayed cannon shells landing on the walls and the dome. Smoke and explosions obscured the area. When they cleared, the walls and the dome were none worse for the wear, save for some singe marks. The command center had not felt even the slightest impact.

The moving country pressed forward, meeting the barrage head-on.

"This should be enough. Cameras, please."

At the diplomat's orders, part of the country's walls opened, spewing two round orbs of black and white. They flew in arcs, wires trailing behind.

One landed in the woods, and the other went clear over the wall between the

mountain ranges. It smashed a small wooden hut to splinters, bounced off the ground, and landed in a farmer's field.

The cameras in the orbs sent live footage to the screens in the command center.

One of the feeds showed the moving country from behind as it slowly approached the wall ahead amidst the barrage of cannon fire.

The other showed the country ahead from inside—the inside of the towering wall, the soldiers busily transporting cannon shells, and the wall on the other side of the country, faintly visible to the west. Further north was a town with stone houses and high-rises, but the rest of the country consisted mostly of fields and plains.

Soon, a group of soldiers approached the camera and opened fire, and set grenades on it. The image on the screen shook.

“Madam President, I believe we will be able to minimize property damage if we pass through the farmlands.”

“Excellent. Please do that,” the president said.

The diplomat said into the microphone, “We will now be passing through the fields on the south side of your country. It shouldn't take more than half a day at full speed. Please do not let us bother you.”

The general roared that he could not let that happen, and that even if their cannons failed, the wall would protect them.

The diplomat did not bat an eyelid. “Cut through the wall, please. The left side, where they haven't installed any cannons.”

A blinding yellow beam materialized on the screen. It was pointed directly at the wall ahead.

Kino watched in shock. Hermes explained, “That's a high-power laser. It uses the same technology as Woodsman's laser sight.”

The laser moved down, then left and up. It cut through the stone wall like a hot knife through butter.

The general anxiously demanded to know what was going on. A section of the



wall slowly came loose and fell forward. Stones began falling from the top of the section before it collapsed whole in a pile of dust.

“We have a way,” said the diplomat.

The president nodded. “Let us proceed.”

The moving country stopped going forward, instead crawling left. The rear camera showed the moving country, cloaked in black smoke, as it resumed its march amidst the cannon fire.

There was another transmission. This time, the general’s voice carried a hint of pleading. He said that the moving country was being unreasonable, and that it should pay a toll for passing through.

“A toll, you say? I’m terribly sorry, but we have nothing to give you. Please, we will stop troubling you soon,” the diplomat said.

The moving country coiled back its two cameras, and rolled into the gap in the wall. The gap was just large enough for it to pass through, without enough space between it and either cross-section of the wall for a car to pass through.

Emerging past the wall, the moving country headed for the farmlands. The screens displayed the soldiers as they stopped fire and stared up in awe.

The country in the plains was vast, carpeted with endless tracts of green fields. The moving country accelerated slightly and carved its tracks into the ground at a walking pace.

Directly in the moving country’s path was a large stone farmhouse. Next to it was a silo for storing grain.

“Oh, a residence,” said the diplomat.

The general immediately demanded that the moving country stop.

“We apologize, sir, but please tell the occupants to leave the house. It’s dangerous in there.”

The moving country did not slow down. A truck drove up next to the house and brought out the people inside. One of them, an elderly woman, refused to board and began shouting desperately at the moving country. She threw a rock at it—which hit nothing but the ground—and collapsed where she stood.

“This is troublesome,” the diplomat muttered, and said to the outraged old woman, “Please move out of the way. You will be crushed if you do not move.”

She refused to budge. The moving country slowly drew closer. The diplomat asked an operator to point the arrow on the screen at a nearby soldier. “Excuse me, sir, but you have a duty to keep your countrymen safe. You must rescue her.”

It took several soldiers to lift the woman off the ground and hoist her onto the truck. It zoomed away in a hurry. All the while, the soldiers on the ground fired on the moving country through the open windows.

The moving country ran over the silo, the barn, the farmhouse, the garage, and the large tree next to it, and passed by without so much as a scratch. The rear camera displayed the scene behind the country—there was no sign that a farm had ever existed there.

“We should be able to pass through without any trouble. What a relief,” said the diplomat. He relaxed in his chair and took a sip of tea someone had served. Kino also received a mug.

The general said that the moving country was abusing its powers and privileges, and that they were inhuman for not considering the lands they destroyed and the lives they ruined.

“Do you believe this, Kino?” Hermes remarked.

“Let’s pretend we didn’t hear anything,” Kino replied.

“Sure.”

Around the time the western wall came into clear view, one of the operators said to the diplomat, “Sir, they’re launching missiles at our flank. At the murals, of all places. The Ministry of Education and the parents are requesting immediate action.”

“What?”

The diplomat sat up and looked at the screen, which switched to a feed of the mural on the right side. Part of the mountain was peeling away. Another screen showed several military vehicles, each loaded with two anti-tank missiles. One

launched a missile trailing black smoke and a guide wire. It landed on the mural. There was a small explosion.. The elephant lost its lower body.

“This is intentional. How could they be so heartless? The children will be very upset. Shall we use the laser on the trucks?” the diplomat asked the president.

The president thought for a moment. “Couldn’t we simply disable the launchers?”

“I’m afraid that will be difficult. The laser’s output is too strong, even at minimal levels.”

“I’d rather avoid any unnecessary bloodshed. I suppose we should let them attack. The walls will hold, and I can explain this to the children later.”

The diplomat turned back to the screen, dejected.

“What about a persuader?” Kino asked.

The diplomat looked up. “Snipe them, you mean? That is an excellent idea, but no one here has the expertise for it.”

“I would like to volunteer,” Kino said.

“This is very dangerous, Traveler.”

“I’ll be fine as long as they don’t use the cannons.”

“But we couldn’t impose like this—”

“It’s the least I can do to pay you back for your hospitality.”

Kino and the diplomat were on the road at the top of the country, just above the mural. They were still in the shelter of the dome. Next to them stood the truck they had taken there.

Kino was in her black jacket and hat, holding her rifle. The rifle was an automatic model she called ‘Flute’, equipped with a nine-round magazine. Kino loaded the first round.

“Their assault is not yet finished. It seems they are sending in several missile launchers at once. The launch cars stop before they attack,” the man said, showing Kino the feed. Four-wheel-drive cars came driving in a line, stopping and taking aim in unison.

“I’m ready,” Kino said.

The man pressed a button, and a small person-sized door opened in the dome. Kino slipped outside with Flute, and lay on her stomach on the road with the persuader in hand. The diplomat gave her a safety harness.

There was a slight breeze outside. Kino crept to the edge of the wall and slowly pointed Flute between the guardrails.

“They’re ready to fire, Kino,” said the diplomat. Kino took aim. Through her scope, she could see a soldier peering into his launch mechanism. She disarmed the safety.

Several gunshots pierced the air.

With each shot, soldiers taking aim looked up in shock. The lenses on their launchers shattered one after another.

Kino started from one end of the line, disabling their launchers.

“Ah!”

But the final one in the line managed to launch before she could shoot. Two missiles flew at Kino, trailing black smoke. She sat up.

The camera displayed a feed of Kino half-lying on the ground, taking aim again. Because there was no microphone, the command center could only tell that Kino was opening fire by the recoil from her persuader and the empty casings popping out of Flute. Another screen showed two missiles flying at the camera exploding in midair.

Two walls stood parallel to one another between a pair of mountain ranges, framing a country inside.

A straight brown line went from one of the walls to the farmlands in the south, far from the crowded city center. At the front of the line was a large, slow-moving dome.

The dome fired a laser, cutting a hole in the western wall. The wall fell without resistance.

The moving country drove over what was once a proud rampart, and continued on. The diplomat took the microphone.

“We apologize for the trouble. Please excuse us.”

The general was trembling with white-hot fury. He demanded restitution for the damages they caused, claiming that his country had the right to demand payment. He ordered the moving country to stop and enter official negotiations.

“I am afraid that your country is the one who declared war first, and as we have not lost, we see no reason to agree to your demands. Please do not be too upset; we will not be passing through this way again. Sow seeds on your land and live in peace. Good day,” the diplomat said, and cut off communications.

The next day.

It was the fourth day of Kino’s stay in the moving country.

The country was once again moving at a walking pace, with the rising sun behind it. The dome had been taken down. The mountain range to the south ended, giving way to an endless plain. Wispy clouds floated by overhead.

“You could conquer and destroy countries with that kind of power,” Kino remarked. She was in her usual black jacket and hat, with holsters on her right thigh and behind her back. Her goggles were around her neck. Hermes was fully loaded.

“I suppose that’s true,” the civil servant replied. They stood on a road inside the moving country, with a truck behind them. “But that is not the life we want. We are perfectly happy with what we have. We live without fear of going hungry. It would be foolishness to risk this comfort and turn the world against us. But we do encounter strong resistance once in a while, like yesterday. It may not be entire countries, but we end up having to drive over roads, levies, or cemeteries.”

“But you’re still going to travel?” Hermes asked.

The man nodded. “Yes. We’ve resigned ourselves to that. After all, who can live without causing trouble for others?”

“Thank you for your hospitality.”

“We’d love to have you stay longer, but I suppose there’s no changing our



heading. I wish you all the best. We'll stop and open the door for you soon."

The man asked Kino one final thing.

"I realize this may be a rude question, but are you interested at all in becoming a citizen of our country, Kino? You are very welcome to join us."

"I'm sorry, but Hermes and I would prefer to travel on our own," Kino said firmly.

The man gave a resigned smile. "I see. Take care, then."

Kino thanked the man for the fuel, ammunition, and rations. He thanked her in turn on behalf of the children.

An announcement played on the PA system, warning that the country was coming to a stop. The door slowly opened.

Kino thanked the man once more, said goodbye, and pushed Hermes out the door. Once she reached the ground, she turned back and saw the door closing on the man as he waved.

Starting Hermes, Kino headed westward.

The country made a 90-degree turn and went south. Kino saw the slightly-damaged mural and the children above it, wearing safety helmets and waving to her.

The motorrad continued westward on the plain. Birds took to the air, spooked by the noise.

"It's been too long." "Yeah. I prefer this, too," said Hermes and Kino.

"That was an interesting country. It caused so much trouble, too."

"Which one?" Kino asked with a chuckle.

"Both. The one that wouldn't let people in blocked off the plains on purpose so they could rip off the travelers passing by."

"Yeah. I might have considered it if they'd asked for labor instead of Woodsman, though."

"They must be rushing to put their walls back up."

“Maybe,” Kino said, smiling. “I wonder where the moving country will go now.”

“Who knows? But I know one thing’s for certain.”

“Yeah?” asked Kino.

Hermes replied, “In a few hundred days, a bunch of kids are going to paint you and Flute on that wall.”

“That’s...kind of embarrassing.”

“Aww, you don’t like it?” Hermes teased.

“I wouldn’t say I don’t,” Kino replied.



第二話  
「ある愛の国」  
— Stray King —



## Chapter 2: Love in a Certain Country -Stray King-

The country was vast—too large to see the walls on the opposite side from the palace at the center of the land, let alone from one end of the country.

Other than the town around the royal palace, and the villages near the east and west gates, the country was composed mostly of farmlands and plains.

Several rivers coursed through the land, connected to a large lake in the southeast. Bright white clouds drifted slowly across the sky.

“He’s not here, either.”

“Damn it. Where could he have gone?”

Panicked attendants were rushing around the palace, slamming open doors and searching the chambers. One of them grabbed a maid and demanded to know where the king was. Terrified, she answered, “His Majesty is meeting a pair of travelers.”

“I know that! Where is he? They may have kidnapped His Grace!”

“Of course not,” the maid protested. But the attendant was skeptical. “It’s within the realm of possibility. I don’t trust those travelers—they look like they could kidnap anyone for profit without blinking an eye. Damn it, you start looking too!”

That was when the maid spotted three people approaching from the other end of the hallway.

One was a young man—the king of the country. Another was a slightly short but handsome man with blue eyes and blond hair. The third person was a woman with long dark hair, wearing an elegant jacket. The latter two were the travelers who were meeting the king.

“What is the meaning of all this commotion?” the king asked. The maid gave a deep bow. The attendant turned in confusion and bowed as well.



The king explained that he had been entertaining his guests over tea in the gardens. “These travelers have been telling me the most riveting stories about the world. Was all this commotion necessary?”

“Apologies, Your Grace.”

“Our guests will stay awhile before their departure. I shall be strolling through the palace, so do not bother searching for me.”

“Of course, Your Grace.”

The king and the travelers left as the attendant bowed apologetically.

A lone car left the palace grounds.

It was small, yellow, and just about on the verge of a breakdown.

In the driver’s seat was the female traveler. The male traveler sat in the passenger seat next to her.

The car rattled and sputtered as it made its way down the cobbled village road, engine ominously coughing up puffs of black and white smoke.

The man said, “Master, could we please do something about this broken window? A new pane of glass wouldn’t hurt our wallets that much.”

The broken driver’s-side window was narrowly hanging on, patched together with tape. It rattled loudly in its frame each time the car shook.

“Later,” said the woman.

The car left the town and made its way onto a narrow road cutting through farmlands. The only people around were the farmers working in the distance.

“Are you sure about this, Your Grace?” the man asked without warning. The king was huddling in the back seat, having comically stuffed himself under the luggage.

The king gave a laugh. “Yes. The king has no power in our country, anyway. My great-grandfather was the last to truly rule—the people don’t even know what I look like. My disappearance won’t hurt anyone but the minority whose job it is to use the people’s tax money on the work of dressing up their king and glorifying the monarchy.”

“I see,” the man said. The woman continued to drive in silence.

“And that is why I have no regrets about leaving my gilded cage. I choose to live for love,” the king declared.

“She must be very beautiful if you’re willing to leave the palace for her,” the man mused with a smile.

“Indeed,” said the king, “I tremble at the mere thought of her graceful countenance. And now I am on my way to be with her forever. My soul is writhing in ecstasy.”

“How did you meet her?”

“There was a festival at the village by the castle,” the king explained. “My attendants may not like it, but even I am allowed to participate, in the guise of a commoner. That was when I met her. She was from a farm on the border. The moment I set eyes on her, I heard the angels of love painting the very world again in their colors. I still remember that divine moment clearly.”

The man whistled, impressed. “But couldn’t you summon her to the palace to be your bride, Your Grace?”

“My ignorant, bigoted attendants wouldn’t have it. They said I was mad; called in doctors and tried to give me all sorts of medication. Saying that there were women more worthy of me. Hah! I see right through them. More like than not, they want me to marry a conceited girl from one of their manipulative families.”

“I see... You’re a real romantic, Your Grace. I approve.”

The king sounded downcast. “I am truly sorry to involve you like this, Travelers. And I am truly grateful. It is so kind of you to help me escape the palace, and for no recompense at that.”

The woman, who had been listening in silence for some time, finally spoke. “Your Grace, your devotion moved us to act. Being branded kidnappers is a small price to pay for your happiness.”

The man smiled. “It’s not as if our reputation could get much worse. You’ve chosen the right people for the job, Your Grace.”

“I shall never forget your generosity, friends. I swear to you, when my beloved and I have wed and children are born to us, we shall name our treasured progeny after you.”

“It’s an honor, Your Grace. I hope you have many beautiful children, and please raise your royal head. And I’m very sorry if my etiquette isn’t up to snuff,” said the man.

The car finally arrived at the boundary of the country, close enough for the ramparts to be visible. There was nothing but farmland all around. The king gave directions to the woman.

“There it is. That house standing alone on the prairie.”

“It’s a lovely house,” said the man.

The car stopped in front of the little hut. The silo in the back made it clear that it was a farmhouse.

With the man’s help, the king crawled out of the back seat and yelled at the top of his lungs, “Marie!” He scrambled to the building.

“So her name’s Marie,” the man said, grinning.

“Who is it?” asked a female voice from behind the house.

The king rushed around to the back. The travelers followed.

Behind the farmhouse was an animal pen and an artificial stream watered by a nearby well. A small wooden pail sat on the ground, and standing next to it was a young woman.

“Marie!” the king gasped, arms spread wide in elation.

The young woman looked up. Her long brown hair was tied into pigtails, and freckles dotted her youthful but beautiful face. She had rolled up her checkered sleeves and was watering a sheep out of her hands.

“Oh my,” said the young woman. She wiped her hands on her apron. “You’re the man I met at the festival.”

The king nodded gently. “I’m so glad you remember me,” he murmured, pausing, “Ever since that day, I couldn’t stop thinking back to the moment we

met. I knew it was fate. So I decided to throw away my life in the capital and come here. I swear, my love shall never grow cold. So please let me stay here with you. Please.”

The young woman seemed a little surprised, but she smiled. “I understand. Then will you live here and help with the work?”

“You have my word, my lady,” the king replied immediately.

The young woman gave an embarrassed look and averted her gaze, but asked slowly and resolutely, “And...you’ll be gentle?”

The king looked her in the eye. “I swear by the very heavens.”

“Then...yes.”

Embarrassed but glad, the young woman gave a firm nod. The king slowly walked up to her. And as the travelers watched, he got down on one knee.

“Marie!” he cried, wrapping his arms around the sheep drinking water out of the pail. “Marie! Oh, my dearest Marie!”

The sheep bleated.

An indescribable look came over the male traveler’s face.

The female traveler stood, expression unchanging. She finally said, “If you’ll excuse us, then.”

The small, rickety yellow car sputtered across the plains, engine wheezing. The ramparts in the side-view mirror grew lower and lower on the horizon, eventually disappearing altogether.

The man was fiddling with his favorite persuader in the passenger seat. It was a slender model with a rectangular barrel and a weight.

But he soon grew bored and holstered the persuader. “Master,” he said.

“Yes?”

“Was that really right, getting the king to Marie?”

“Who knows?” the woman replied. “As long as they’re happy.”

“I suppose so...” the man sighed. “By the way, Master. I’m very impressed.”

“By what?”

“The fact that you did work for no profit, outcome notwithstanding. You’re more of a romantic than you let on.”

The woman cast him a glance. “Maybe I am. Check under my seat.”

Curious, the man reached over and pulled up a sack. It was surprisingly heavy, filled with sparkling jewelry, gemstones, and coins.

A stunned silence fell over the man. “Er...Master? Where did you...?”

“The king’s chambers and the hallways. I decided to help myself while we were packing,” the woman said without so much as blinking.

“Master?”

“Yes?”

“Does the phrase ‘robbing a burning house’ ring a bell?”

“Of course,” the woman replied, and added, “He won’t need it anyway. Besides...”

“Yes?”

“Our reputation couldn’t get any worse if we tried.”

The little yellow car continued, coughing up white smoke.

“Master.”

“Yes?”

“Once the palace finds out, they’ll start distributing wanted posters to passing travelers.”

“I don’t mind. Or shall we go back and return the spoils?” the woman said, stopping the sputtering car. Black smoke rose from under the hood.

The man in the passenger seat thought for a moment and finally said, “Master, could we please do something about this broken window?”

“Later,” the woman said, stepping on the gas pedal again.







# Chapter 3: At the Riverside -Intermission-

My name is Riku. I am a dog.

I have long, soft, white fur. I may always look like I'm smiling, but I was just born with this look; it doesn't necessarily mean I am happy all the time.

My owner is Master Shizu. He is a young man who always wears a green sweater. Having lost his home under complex circumstances, he now travels the world on a buggy.

We were in a forest lush with the colors of spring. The morning sun beamed down warmly from above.

Next to us was the sound of rushing water, and a wide waterfall jutting off a shelf-shaped boulder. The waterfall urned into a river that snaked between the towering trees and short grass.

Parked in the middle of the river was a buggy, its tires submerged halfway. Master Shizu was cleaning it, his sleeves rolled up and his jeans soaked to the knees. I sat at the riverside, watching his boots, bag, and sword, and looking out for potential attackers. We were in no rush. Birds were chirping in the distance.

We arrived here the previous evening and camped out for the night. And this morning, after bathing and doing the laundry in the river, Master Shizu forced me into the water and gave me a bath as well. I was almost dry.

Afterwards, he did something very unusual.

“We should clean him up once in a while,” he said, driving the buggy into the shallows. Master Shizu began scrubbing the dirt and grease off the frame, as he had with me earlier. The water under the buggy turned dark for a time, but eventually cleared.

The country we visited most recently never said so openly, but it was clear from the people’s attitudes that they had no patience for outlanders.

Master Shizu never said so openly, but he could sense how they felt. Without even looking for work, he bought and sold what he could and departed in the

evening.

The birds were chirping.

Master Shizu dipped a rag into the water, wrung it out, and wiped the buggy and the seats with it. But partway through, he fell into thought and came back to the riverside. I watched curiously as he picked up a fallen branch and took it back to the buggy.

With the branch, he dusted off the mud clinging to the pipe frame.

I decided to ask him something I had never asked before. Where had Master Shizu gotten the buggy?

“I could’ve sworn I told you,” he said, surprised, and explained as he wiped the buggy clean.

Master Shizu said that before he met me, he had once been forced to travel on foot because there were no merchants in need of bodyguards to the next country, which was mercifully not very far. It was during this trip that he found himself in what was once a battlefield. A fierce war had raged there, leaving behind broken-down vehicles and frozen corpses under a thin layer of snow.

He had searched the bodies and vehicles for valuables, examining each and every wrist and finger. But he turned up nothing. Instead, Master Shizu had discovered the buggy. Miraculously, it was still intact and the engine was still in working order. Master Shizu hefted the bodies off the buggy and gathered fuel and fuel tanks from nearby vehicles, taking the buggy for himself.

I see, I replied. Master Shizu chuckled and added that after driving for some time, the buggy began to stink. When he inspected it, he said, he found a rotting arm stuck under the frame.

Master Shizu said that he had not done proper maintenance on the buggy since, and that he had barely ever washed it.

He bent down, disappearing behind the buggy. A moment later, he gave a surprised gasp, standing back up with something in his hands.

It was a thin metal plate. The plate was the same color as the buggy, folded with a hinge to the size of a notebook. “It was stuck in the frame,” Master Shizu

said, dropping the branch and unfolding the plate.

The fallen branch drifted downstream and disappeared from sight. Master Shizu smiled, holding up the plate in both hands.

I asked him what was on it. He waded through the currents and held it open in front of me.

The plate was engraved with a message.

*Our beloved buggy,*

*We go out to war. We shall fight for our country and the families waiting for us.*

*We are soldiers. We are prepared to die.*

*Only by fighting to the death can our country emerge victorious and our families remain safe.*

*Our beloved buggy, you will fight and die with us.*

*We were born to do battle. We were born to pierce the enemy's ranks and charge through their barrage.*

*You are our place of battle. Our final resting place.*

*And once we have all expired, you, too, will die with us inside you.*

It was a letter from the soldiers to the buggy.

When I looked up, I spotted Master Shizu with his gaze locked on the buggy. "He's just like us," he said.

I stared, confused. Master Shizu smiled. "He should have died, but ended up surviving."

Master Shizu picked up the plate, folded it up, and tossed it away.

The plate spun rapidly and landed in the river. Then it sank.

Master Shizu took the driver's seat and started the engine. It seemed to sing.

When he brought the buggy to shore, water dripped off the frame and onto the grass.

He wiped his legs and feet, put on his boots, and loaded the buggy. I leapt up

to the passenger seat; it was still slightly wet, and so was I, but we would dry soon.

“That mechanic was pretty good,” Master Shizu said, enjoying the sound of the engine.

I remembered the snow, the overcast sky, and the white, desolate plains that seemed to stretch on forever underneath.

Yes, I agreed.

Master Shizu turned. “Let’s get going.”

I asked him where we were headed.

“I’m not sure. Someplace I don’t know.”

With that, the buggy carried us off.







# Chapter 4: The Wintertime Story -D-

The room was narrow, mostly filled by the lone single wooden bed in the middle. There was scarcely enough room for another.

A picture frame with a curved top hung from the light brown wall. It was made to look like a window, portraying white-winged angels flying across the blue sky and animals grazing on a green plain.

There were no real windows in the room. A naked lightbulb hung from the low ceiling, giving off a dim glow.

An elderly woman lay in the bed, covered by a green quilt with her head resting on a large pillow. Her eyes were open, but they did not seem to be looking at anything in particular. Slow, weak breaths escaped her gaping mouth.

Five people stood around her.

Two women and two men, all dressed from head to toe in unblemished white. They stood on either side of the old woman, wearing white aprons, hats, and masks.

The last person was younger, a girl in her mid-teens. She had short black hair and fair features, and stood at the foot of the bed with a large sack in her left hand.

The four adults were speaking to the elderly woman. There was no response. But they continued as though all five of them were part of the conversation.

The conversation was about the past. The four adults chuckled and smiled on occasion.

The younger person, who wore a black jacket, stood in utter silence and looked on as though she were part of another world.

One of the adults burst out laughing.

That was when the elderly woman finally moved, a faint smile rising slowly to her lips.

One of the four adults gestured to the others. They all looked down at the

elderly woman.

The young person in black put her right hand into her sack. When she let go of the sack, it fell silently to the floor, revealing the object in her right hand.

When she raised it, a thin red beam appeared and stopped on the chest of the elderly woman in the bed.

The four adults did not notice.

There was a quiet noise. Then a second, then a third. Along with three metallic clicks.

As the adults looked on, the elderly woman's head jumped slightly from the pillow, as though she had been shocked. Then her head fell limply back into the pillow, her eyes slightly open. The quiet breathing had stopped. A dark red stain spread on the quilt. But it did not spread past her chest.

The person in black was holding a persuader in her hands. A .9mm automatic that had a trigger with a built-in safety mechanism. It was equipped with a laser sight and a cylindrical suppressor. Three empty cartridges rolled on the floor.

The four adults turned.

One man stared at the persuader-wielder, his mask and hat hiding everything but his gaze. "'What is the meaning of this, Heretic'?"

"'I killed her because I wished to'," the person in black replied.

"'Begone from this place, Heretic'."

"'I shall'."

Once the short exchange was over, the person in black put her persuader in the sack and opened the door at the back of the room.

One of the adults gently closed the eyes of the deceased, and just as the person in black was leaving, said with a trembling voice,

"Thank you... Thank you so much."

Without responding, the person in black left.

The country's stone walls towered around its perimeter. A set of tightly-closed metal gates were the only way in or out.

Outside the country was a forest of tall, thin coniferous trees.

The forest was covered in snow, piled up to the height of a child. Not even a single patch of dirt was exposed to the air.

A thick layer of grey clouds blanketed the sky, and the air was humid.

A long walkway started just next to the gates. Its high roofs led all the way into the forest. The path was paved with stone and lined on either side with strong walls to keep the snow out. Beyond the walls, snow fallen from the roofs had piled into snowbanks that concealed the pathway from view.

Next to the large gates was a small door. It was covered with stones just like the walls, so it would be difficult to see from a distance. The door opened inwards with a quiet creak.

The person in black emerged, holding her sack. This time, there was a holstered large-caliber persuader strapped to her right thigh.

A pair of guards followed after her, both armed with long spears and dress uniforms. Standing on either side of the door, they glared from behind their helmets. When the person in black turned, both stamped their feet in unison.

“‘Heretic! You have killed one of our countrymen and are hereby banished’!” one of them ordered.

The person in black put down the sack with the persuader at the guard’s feet. And she said without a hint of emotion, “‘I understand. I will now leave your country’.”

She turned back and made her way down the path, with the guards behind her. Snow had blown in from outside, forming a carpet that crunched softly under her feet.

The guards were still standing straight, but now with much gentler expressions. One of them said to the person in black, “We’ll send everything over later, as usual.”

The person in black replied without turning, “I understand. Please leave them in the usual place.”

“Of course. Thank you, Kino,” the guard said, holding his spear before him.

Kino slowly went down the walkway. The path was lined on either side with pillars at regular intervals, and snow had piled up at points along the way.

The sky grew darker, and without warning, it began to snow. The heavy, wet snow bore down upon the world without a sound.

Kino stopped to stare out into the world between the piles of snow and the roof over her head. She felt like she and the rest of the world had risen up into the clouds.

After taking some time to take in the sight, she resumed her journey down the walkway. Bells went off frantically in the country behind her.

At the end of the walkway was a lodge.

It was large and made of wood and stone with chimneys sticking out of the roof, too sturdy to be an abandoned house in the wilderness. There was one main section and a long, narrow hall in the back lined with rooms. The walkway led straight to its front door.

A thick layer of snow blanketed the roof. Icicles hung from the edges.

Kino stopped at the step in front of the door to shake the snow off her boots, and went inside.

The door opened into a common area furnished with all the essentials. There were wood stoves and fireplaces at either end of the room. A large window gave her a clear view of the forest outside. It was still dark, and still snowing.

Kino went to the hallway and walked into the first room. She pressed a switch by the door. The light flickered on.

The room was furnished with a bed, a desk, a chair, and a small dresser—atop which was a large suitcase—and the windows were covered with thick curtains. A motorrad was waiting inside.

“Oh, hey Kino,” said the motorrad. The sun was setting.

“I’m back, Hermes.”

“Welcome back. How many did you get done today?” asked Hermes.

“Three people.”

“That’s a lot. No wonder you took so long.”

“Yeah.”

The next morning, Kino rose at dawn.

The snow showed no sign of letting up. It was practically a shower of snow, flowing in streams and obscuring the forest outside the window.

Kino went out into the empty common area for light exercises. She did drawing practice with the persuader she called Woodsman, then maintained it.

Afterwards, Kino took a shower and changed. The country supplied hot water to the lodge.

Behind the building was a hut for storing firewood, and next to it a large stone box. Kino opened it and took out potatoes, onions, and sausages.

She split the firewood, tossed the pieces into the stove, and started a fire. Putting a large skillet on the flame, Kino chopped up the ingredients and stir-fried them together. Half the portion was for her breakfast.

Then Kino boiled water in a small mug and steeped herself some tea.

The room grew brighter when the sun rose above the snowbanks. It was still snowing.

Kino returned to her room and pushed Hermes out into the common area, propping him up on his center stand.

“No bells today, Kino?” he asked.

“No,” Kino replied.

The fire was crackling. It was warm inside.

Kino had taken off her jacket and was sitting in a chair in the common area. In front of her were a small bottle of oil, a flint, and knives of varying sizes.

“Done. I’ve got nothing else to do today,” Kino said.

“I’m bored. Wanna play some word games?” Hermes suggested. It was still snowing outside.

Kino grimaced. “You’re going to use a word I don’t know again, aren’t you?”

“Hmph. ‘Susanna’ is a word. It’s a kind of food.”

“...Maybe I should start on lunch.”

Kino picked up her knives, put them away in her bags and pockets, and went to the window. The skillet was next to it, still containing leftovers from breakfast and covered with a lid. Kino shoved it into the fire to warm it up.

After lunch, Kino washed the skillet with water from melted snow and hung it up where she had found it.

She was sipping on her tea when she heard footsteps at the door. Someone knocked.

“Not every day you get visitors,” Hermes remarked.

Kino rose. “We’re visitors too, you know.”

“This is the place, right? I mean, not that there’s anywhere else it could be.”

The man was about forty years of age, with a thick mustache and beard, and hair in a messy waist-length ponytail. He wore winter gear with a wool hat and a large pack on his back. Snowshoes were affixed to his feet.

“Nice to meet you. The name’s Dis. I’m a traveler. The gatekeeper told me to come here.”

“Hello. My name is Kino, and this here is my partner Hermes.”

“Hi.”

Dis put down his things at the door and began stripping off his winter gear and snowshoes, giving nods of approval at the building.

Kino offered him a seat. Dis took it with a word of thanks, breathing a sigh of relief. He explained that he had been traveling on horseback, until the horse collapsed in the snow and he was forced to make the treacherous journey on foot. He had arrived at the country that morning.

“I’m surprised to see someone as young as you on the road.”

“What do you mean?”

“No offense, of course. It’s just that travelers tend to be on the road for a reason. A lot of them, I mean, they’re people who can’t go back home for one

reason or another. Who am I kidding, I'm one of those folks. Let's try and get along, no poking our noses into each other's business, hm?" he said jovially.

Kino nodded.

"I didn't know anything about this country before I got here. It's more fun that way, I think. First thing I asked at the gates was for work I could do till spring, and they were floored. And they sent me over here. Don't know anything else about this place. They said I should ask you for the details. I can live and work here, right?"

"Yes."

"I don't mean to brag, but I've got skills I could put to work in most any country. It won't take me too long to find myself a new horse, or maybe something better."

"I see. I'm sorry to say this," Kino said, "but the work they give us doesn't require much in the way of skill."

Dis was surprised. "Really? What kind of work is it?"

Kino replied without blinking, "Killing the people of this country."

Then she explained the country's custom, with Hermes chiming in to fill in the gaps.

This country's religion forbade its people from giving medical treatment.

According to their doctrines, intervening in such a way was a sin. It went against the will of their god. Their faith claimed that humans were a part of nature, and that they must rely on natural healing as the wild animals do in order to survive. Humans were born in nature, and they must die in nature. Medical intervention was one of the most abominable sins in their culture, an act that could prevent a soul from being accepted into paradise.

That meant that the ill and the injured could not receive assistance. They had to let their own bodies fix themselves. Loved ones could do little but provide food and water upon request.

Minor injuries and illnesses were no concern, but those with serious wounds and diseases were essentially being left to fend for themselves. As a result,



most people suffered excruciating pain before dying of 'natural' causes.

That was why the people of the country naturally began seeking out ways to end the suffering of their mortally ill and injured loved ones. But they could not kill their own countrymen, as the souls of murderers were condemned for eternity.

There was only one way to reach paradise without dying a natural death: to be killed by a nonbeliever. It was a provision that had been made for the case of war, decreeing that anyone who was killed by a nonbeliever was automatically granted entry to paradise.

"So that makes them carters."

"You mean 'martyrs'?"

"Yeah, that."

Once in the distant past, someone in the country had asked a passing traveler to do exactly that. The traveler accepted, killing a sick person and being exiled. But not before receiving a handsome reward from the family of the deceased.

In the years that followed, the act became a national tradition. The government built a lodge for travelers outside the walls, asking them to perform the act before banishing them from the country, in exchange for food and supplies. Travelers were permitted reentry at will.

To prevent migration to the country, travelers were only permitted to stay for up to 90 days—for one season. Some stayed only a single day and others stayed the full allotment. In the winter, the lodge was either empty or inhabited by travelers who would be stuck there for the full duration because of the heavy snowfall.

Kino explained that she had arrived thirty days earlier, and that she would be staying until the snow had melted enough for her to safely ride her motorrad.

Dis did not say a word, simply staring as he listened.

Afterwards, Kino gave him a short overview of the lodge. There were many free rooms in the back, and the building was supplied with electricity, hot water, food, and firewood. Everything in the lodge legally belonged to the

people residing in it, and euthanasia requests had to be divided fairly between everyone. That was the condition for living there.

“You can borrow persuaders and ammunition from the gates. And no one will bother you afterwards as long as you respond appropriately to the things they say, about you being a ‘heretic’.”

Hermes said, “Any questions?”

“Yes,” Dis finally said. “Of the people you’ve put to rest...were they any—even one person—who might have lived if they’d been given the kind of treatment your motherland could provide?”

Kino thought for a moment. “I think so.”

“Then...does that make you a murderer?”

“Maybe.”

“Was murder legal in your motherland?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t know much about the world of adults.”

Dis was silent.

“Do you have any other questions? If not, I think my work is done for the time being.”

“...You killed them. I don’t want to kill people.”

“I see.”

Dis glared.

Hermes said, “You said you’re on the road because you can’t go home anymore. But you’ve never killed anyone?”

“I have.”

Kino finally said, “Then as long as we’re here, I’m not obligated to keep you fed, and you aren’t obligated to keep me fed, either.”

That evening, Dis sat on the edge of his bed in the room he had chosen. A small lightbulb hung from the ceiling. A leather bag lay on the desk, next to which was a messy wrapper from his portable rations.

It was dark outside, and still snowing silently.

“Damn it...I shouldn’t have come here...” he whispered, slowly turning his gaze to the leather bag. “Damn it...damn it...”

Dis whispered deep into the night, but no one heard his mutterings.

Kino sat on the edge of her bed. A small lightbulb hung from the ceiling, its reflection distorting against Hermes’ fuel tank. The curtains had been drawn shut.

“Even if it’s something you don’t want to do, and know it’s wrong, huh?” Kino wondered.

Hermes said, “You’re you, Kino. You don’t need to do what he says. Anyway, you should start thinking about what to do once spring arrives.”

“Spring. That’s still a long ways off.”

The next morning.

Faint traces of color returned to the forest at the break of dawn. The pale blue glow grew lighter and lighter until the snow, the trees, and the leaves regained their hues.

Though the snow had stopped, it was still cloudy outside. The forest was buried even deeper than the previous day. It was eerily quiet, with nary a bird call to be heard—only the sound of snow slipping off the branches broke the silence.

Kino warmed herself up before doing her usual exercises and persuader drills. Then she showered and changed, secured Cannon on her right thigh, and put on a black jacket over her white shirt. She smacked Hermes awake and pushed him into the common area, propping him up next to one of the chairs.

Then she made breakfast; the same amount as the previous day.

Kino was sipping tea after her meal when Dis emerged.

“Who’re you?” Hermes asked, flabbergasted. Kino was equally surprised.

Dis was completely clean-shaven, his hair now cut short and tidied. He looked like a much younger man.

Just as glum as the previous night, he greeted Kino and Hermes and took a seat at the table.

“Did you cut your hair yourself?” Kino asked.

“Yes,” Dis replied, nodding.

“You’re very good. I’m a little jealous.”

Dis did not respond. Kino told him that she had made an additional portion of breakfast that she was saving for lunch, but that he could have it himself so long as he washed the skillet later.

That was when the bells went off. The peals went on and on, multiple bells ringing frantically from inside the walls.

“The morning bells are a signal telling the citizens that they’re ‘being attacked by heretics’.”

Without a word, Dis went to the kitchen. He warmed up Kino’s leftovers and brought the food to the table.

“You have to earn your keep.”

Dis glanced at Kino, then at the skillet. And he started eating.

“We’ll take turns from now on, one person per day. Would you like to stay or go today?” “Well?” asked Kino and Hermes, almost simultaneously. Dis continued to eat without responding.

Once he had finished, Dis set aside the skillet and fork and gave Kino the same glare as the previous evening.

“I’ll go,” he said. “Hope you won’t have any complaints.”

With that, he rose from the table and went back to his room. But Dis was not gone long—he returned to the common area, dressed in winter gear and carrying a small bag.

“I’ll make sure you never have to go to that country again,” he said.

Kino slowly stood. “What do you mean?”

“I want to save them.”

“How?” asked Hermes.

“Medical intervention, of course.”

“Even if you convince them, they don’t have any doctors who could give treatment. They might not even have a word for medicine,” Kino said.

Dis nodded. “Of course.”

“Then how?” asked Hermes. “You’re going to make a phone call and ask a doctor to come?”

Slowly shaking his head, Dis replied, “That won’t be necessary. You’re looking at one.” He opened up the leather bag he had been holding, revealing showing its contents.

The first thing Kino saw was a set of scalpels, arranged neatly in a row. The bag also contained a stethoscope and syringes, along with medical equipment packed neatly inside their cases.

“So you weren’t a barber.” “Wow.” Kino and Hermes were floored.

Dis nodded and closed his bag. “I’m a doctor. I told you, I can put my skills to work in most any country.”

“Of course...” “Right.”

“I used to work at hospitals on my journey. Taught people medicine, and once in a long time I’d even learn a thing or two.”

“But why are you on the road?” Hermes asked.

Dis gave a wry grin. “I thought we agreed to not poke our noses into each other’s business.”

“You and Kino did. I never agreed.”

Dis gave a bitter laugh and gave in. “All right. Let me tell you why I left home. It’s kind of funny, telling this story in a place like this. Well, long story short, I used to be a doctor. And I killed my patients, because they were beyond saving.”

“You mean...” Kino trailed off. Hermes finished for her, “You euthanized them.”

“I told you, I’ve killed people in the past.”

“I see.”

Kino waited for Hermes to speak.

“So that’s your story, huh?” he said.

Dis nodded. “That’s right. I don’t mean to brag, but my hometown was on the cutting edge of medical science; although I didn’t realize how developed we were until after I left. I learned so much there. But even with all the knowledge and techniques at our disposal, some patients were just too far gone. There was no cure, no treatment. Nothing we could do for them but help them manage their pain. And sometimes, even that didn’t work. Don’t get me wrong. We weren’t useless. But sometimes we were helpless. All we could do was stand by and watch.”

“So some people wanted to die,” Hermes theorized.

“Yeah. Patients modern medicine couldn’t save. The ones whose pain we couldn’t ease. They wanted to die peacefully, with dignity. They wanted to die comfortably in their homes, smiling with their loved ones and showering them with words of wisdom as they passed, rather than as ragged shells of their former selves just waiting to die of the pain.”

“Like the people in the country over here?” Kino asked.

“Exactly,” Dis replied. “But in my hometown, euthanasia was illegal. There were a lot of reasons, but the crux of the argument was that it was murder, even if the patient wanted it.”

“But you did it anyway.”

“I did. Not without a lot of agonizing. It wasn’t exactly like deciding what to have for lunch. I spent years and years wondering if it was the right thing to do.”

“So what happened?”

“I did it for years. Worked as a doctor, and quietly euthanized people who asked. Funny enough, both the people I saved and the people I killed thanked me. But one day, I was caught and arrested. There are no secrets in this world.”

“And then?”

“By the time they found me out, I’d killed more than just a handful of people. The whole country was in an uproar. Huge debates about assisted suicide. But in the end, the laws didn’t change. I assumed I’d get life in prison if I was lucky, and capital punishment if I wasn’t. Looking back, I don’t know if things were quite that serious, but I was certainly prepared for the worst. I was even ready to put myself down if it came down to that. When they sentenced me to banishment, I barely registered what was going on. And that’s how it happened.”

“I get it now. Thanks for telling us.”

“You’re welcome,” Dis said, and turned his gaze to Kino. “Sorry it got so long. I’ll be off now; and I’ll be doing whatever I can. If heretics are allowed to kill citizens, that’s what I’ll do. In my own way. And who knows? Maybe my hand will slip and I’ll end up treating them instead. I might accidentally develop medication for them. And if they happen to take the medication, which might for some reason help their bodies heal themselves, it’s not my responsibility.”

“You don’t know if they’ll let you get away with it. Is that all right right you?”

“It is.”

“Even though it’s a matter of life and death?”

“That’s what life always is, isn’t it? Every decision leads up to that crossroads between life and death. I’ve sentenced people to one or the other so many times now. And now I’m going to sentence myself. I was up thinking about it last night—although partway through I stopped thinking about what I should do, and ended up thinking more about what I *want* to do.”

“I see... And what if I were to persuade you to reconsider?”

Dis understood what Kino was implying. “Ah, I see. If I succeed, you might not be able to live here anymore. You’d be losing your work and home, in one sense.”

“That’s right. I may try to stop you, even if it means taking your life. I may have to pull the trigger on you in order to survive,” Kino said, glancing at Cannon and putting a hand to her right side.

“A .44 caliber revolver. A beautiful weapon. And lethal, too.”

“Yes.”

“But it’s not going to persuade me,” Dis replied, picking up his bag in his right hand and gently tapping his chest with his left fist. “If you’re going to do it, I recommend the heart. Three good shots, no hesitation. Make it quick and painless,” he said with a smile, and turned. He went to the door and opened it, stepping outside.

“I’ll pray that the bells don’t ring,” Kino said.

Dis did not turn. “Prayers don’t save people.”

“I know.”

“I’m sorry it had to come to this.”

“I’m sorry too.”

Dis stepped forward again. He went off down the walkway. Kino’s hand was stopped over her holster.

That was when, without warning, he turned. He was beaming. “By the way, I forgot to tell you something!”

“What is it?”

“Thank you for breakfast! It was delicious! Goodbye, Kino.”

Kino was flabbergasted.

She watched him depart, until he disappeared into the distance. Then she shut the door.

Afternoon passed.

The snow stopped.

The wind chased away the clouds, and the sky began to emerge.

It was evening.

The snow was still piled high on the ground, but the red glow of the sun shone bright like pillars through the gaps.

Kino sat at a desk in the common area, dismantling Woodsman, her automatic



hand persuader, to clean it. Then she put it back together.

When she looked up, she saw icicles outside the window dripping water.

That was when she heard footsteps, and a knock. Hermes woke up. "A visitor."

Kino holstered Woodsman and rose.

"Kino, are you there?" said a familiar voice.

"Hey, that's one of the guards," Hermes said.

Opening the door, Kino saw both guards and let them in. One was carrying a wooden box, and the other was empty-handed.

"I have unfortunate news, Kino," said one of the guards, whom she had met often at the gates.

"What is it?"

Standing up straight, he broke the news to Kino. "'A heretic who entered our country today intervened with one of our countrymen, who was courageously battling illness with dignity. The heretic bears a striking resemblance to the man who came to this lodge alone yesterday'."

Kino was silent. Hermes said, "Ooh, so what happened?"

"'His intervention, thankfully, was not severe, and our countryman's body has tapped into the innate capacity for healing we are all born with and is recovering quickly. However, we cannot let the heretic's act go unpunished. We have arrested him and have passed judgement upon him, that he may never do such a thing again. The heretic's sentence is visitation with each and every one of our countrymen who are suffering from illness or injury. He is to see every last one of them and apologize for his actions. The heretic accepted his punishment with gratitude. It is only fitting. He will be unable to return to this lodge for some time. We have given him strict orders to never intervene again, but should he happen to commit yet more offenses, his punishment will continue forever'."

"Really? He sounds like a troublesome man." "Yeah."

"'Indeed he is. We have no idea what was going through his mind. We have

also decided that until the man has repented fully, you will be barred from entering our country. We cannot provide you with a persuader, as we did at the gates’.”

“I understand.”

“Finally, although the heretic is a loathsome criminal, we shall provide him with humane treatment. He will be guaranteed food and shelter. When we informed him, however, he had the gall to say that he was a light eater, and that he wanted half of his portion to go to the outlander living outside the country for no particular reason’.”

The other guard put down the wooden box and opened it. It was filled with food, as usual. “We cannot partake in food left by a heretic and a criminal. But it goes against our doctrines to waste the food provided us by our god and the earth, so we have come to rid ourselves of it. We will be coming by every day with more. You and the other heretics living in his place do not have the right of refusal’.”

“That is all from our country! We shall now collect the belongings of the heinous criminal. Would you like to pass on a message to the heretic’?”

“Yes,” Kino said, smiling.

“Please, go on.”

“Please tell him that I’m sorry he had to eat my cooking. And that he was the first person to compliment my food with a smile.”

“Pardon me?” the guard asked, smiling.

“Master might have died if she’d eaten that,” Hermes said.

“She’d have shot me to death first, though.”

The guards exchanged glances. “We shall pass on your message, Heretic’.”

“Please.”

The guards gingerly packed up Dis’s things and left the lodge.

The red evening sun soon disappeared behind the trees. Clumps of snow slid loudly from the roof.

Darkness fell over the world. The bell did not ring once.

That night, Kino sat on the edge of her bed. A small lightbulb hung from the ceiling, its reflection distorting against Hermes' fuel tank.

Kino was laying out her things on the bed.

Neatly-folded shirts, her hat, her gloves, and a miscellany of other things sat on the sheets. Kino picked them up and put them in her suitcase.

Once everything was in, she closed the lid. Kino picked up her lukewarm cup of tea and took a sip.

"What're you gonna do when spring comes, Kino?" Hermes asked.

"Spring, huh? I think I'll—"









# Chapter 5: The Story of a Tea Party in the Woods -Thank You-

This story takes place in a forest.

A dirt road ran between the trees in the deep, dark wood. It was straight as an arrow and flatter than a pancake, occasionally rising and falling with the terrain.

There wasn't a country to be seen anywhere around. Nothing but nature for miles and miles.

A gentle creek wound its way across the forest, a little shallow for swimming but perfect for splashing around. The water was so clear that the muddy floor was clearly visible.

When the road reached the creek, it became a bridge. The bridge was made of stone and very, very old.

An old man sat on the edge with his fishing pole beside him.

He was tall and elderly, half-bald and the rest of his head covered in white hair. He was dressed in a pair of overalls like a farmer. Next to him was a pail of water, but without any fish inside.

The sun hung high up in the sky, casting warm rays onto the ground. Long, thin clouds floated overhead, too faint to even cast shadows. What season was it, you ask? Almost summertime.

The old man looked up and gazed out at the road. He hadn't heard wrong—a car was lazily drawing near, leaving a trail of dust in its wake.

The car was small, yellow, and messy. It was even rusted and broken in places. The old man put down his fishing rod and rose slowly, waving at the car.

It stopped on the bridge with a worrying noise.

Two people were inside. In the driver's seat on the right was a slightly short but handsome man, a holstered automatic hand persuader on his left side. In



the passenger seat was a woman with shimmering black hair, wearing elegant clothes and armed with a large-caliber persuader on her right side. They exchanged surprised glances.

“You two must be travelers,” the old man exclaimed.

The woman replied, “It’s nice to meet you, sir. We didn’t expect to see a person all the way out here.”

“I’ve abandoned my country. My wife and I live alone in the forest now,” the old man said, and invited the travelers to his home for tea. He asked them to tell stories about their travels, and even offered to let them stay overnight at the house if they were tired.

“We’re not in any rush. Thank you for your hospitality,” the woman said.

The old man beamed. “Wonderful! It’ll be a fine day with the two of you around. I’ll go on ahead on foot; the house is just up the creek. You can come by car. It’s a bit of a detour, but just follow the road all the way and take the first left, down the hill.”

The woman nodded. The man asked one thing before he went to the car. “Are the fish biting?”

“They sure are,” the old man smiled, holding up his fishing rod and the pail of water. He reeled in the hook with an expert hand and went off on foot. “We’ll be waiting for you.”

“Master, are we really going?” the man asked.

“Yes,” the woman replied immediately. “A tea party in the woods has its charms.”

The man muttered, “I suppose so...”

Deeper in the woods was a house.

Part of the house was a metal structure, which had probably once been part of a truck. The windows were covered with plywood, and attached to it was a log cabin.

The house stood next to the creek, and was surrounded by an orderly vegetable patch. There was even a small barn in the back with animals inside.

The run-down yellow car hobbled down the narrow road and finally came to a stop in front of the house. The old couple was waiting.

The travelers greeted their hosts. The old woman was all smiles as she led the guests inside. The raised porch was made of plywood, and decorated with potted flowers in full bloom.

Just through the front door was the living room. The house was larger than it looked. There were even more rooms further in the back.

The cabin was humble, but put together with love and care. The furniture and the tools were all handmade. Wooden trays and framed pictures of nature decorated the log cabin's walls. Matching plates were arranged neatly in the cupboard. A pair of carved broomsticks hung together from a thick log pillar.

The windows on either side of the building were large, scavenged from old windshields. A cool breeze wafted in from the open one. Outside, they had a great view of green fields, the beautiful woods, and the gentle creek.

The table was cut from large logs, and the wooden chairs had been put together with intricate craftsmanship. The travelers thanked the couple and took their seats. The old man sat across from them, and his wife went to the stove in the corner to brew them tea.

"Lovely house you have here. It's a pleasant surprise to see people living like this," said the man.

The old man chuckled. "I'm glad to hear that."

Then, he told the story of how he and his wife came to live in the forest. They had been married for a long time, but were childless. He explained that they left their country on a trailer when they were much younger, and fell in love with the warm but deserted forest they happened to pass by. They built the house with the things they found in nature, raised livestock and vegetables, and made the things they needed with all-natural materials as they lived in isolation for decades. He also explained that he and his wife invited over any travelers who happened by (who were not many) to serve them tea.

"I'm impressed. I'd like to live like this once I'm older, myself," the woman said quietly.

The man was shocked. “I had no idea,” he exclaimed.

“Even I can’t stay on the road forever.”

“I suppose that’s true.”

That was when the old man asked, “Where are you two headed?”

The man saw an opportunity to speak. He explained that they had no destination in mind, and that they had no homes or families to return to. He added that they were not merchants, either. “I suppose you could just call us wanderers,” he said with a hint of a masochistic smile. The woman said nothing.

“I see. Traveling does come with its share of troubles and wonder,” the old man mused.

“Personally, I think I’d get bored of living in one place forever,” said the man.

The old man replied, “Living in the same place offers new things to discover. Like the joy of working the land and living off nature.”

“Tea’s ready,” the old woman said, bringing over a tray. Four empty teacups and a large teapot.

Curious, the woman asked for permission and examined one of the cups, turning it upside-down. It was shaped to perfection and even colored. “Are the cups handmade too? They’re works of art.”

The old woman nodded proudly. Chuckling, her husband explained that they had scoured the woods for years looking for the right clay for dishes and cups, until they finally found it right under their noses, on the shores of the creek by the house.

“Go on, now. The tea’s getting cold,” said the old woman, pouring them all tea. She placed one cup each in front of everyone at the table and took a seat.

“Thank you,” the woman said, bringing the teacup to her lips to check how hot it was, before taking a sip. She made sure to emphasize how delicious it was. The old couple drank their tea as well.

Finally, after some hesitation, the man sipped his tea.

“I only wish I could have served some cookies with the tea. We just finished

the last of the batch yesterday,” the old woman said apologetically.

The woman shook her head. “Not at all, ma’am.”

“Travelers, since you’re not in any hurry, why not spend the night here?” the old man offered. “We’d love to have you for dinner, listen to stories about the outside world.”

The woman took a sip of tea and shook her head. “I’m afraid we can’t do that.”

The couple seemed a little surprised. The woman put down her cup, rose from her seat, and threw her chair at the window.

There was a deafening crash as the window shattered. The chair broke on impact.

“Ah!” the old woman screamed. The man threw his chair too. It hit the wall of the cabin and fell apart.

The woman strode over to the dresser and kicked it. The thin plywood snapped, and the small clay ornaments on top broke into pieces. The man grabbed the plates in the cupboard and threw every last one of them to the ground. They shattered one after another.

“Wh-what is the meaning of this?” the old man finally managed to speak, eyes filled with shock and fear, trembling hands clasped in front of his chest. “Please stop! I beg of you!”

Ignoring his pleas, the travelers went around the house and broke everything in sight. The man kicked in the other window. The woman threw the pictures to the floor and stomped on them, frames and all.

“Please stop this!” cried the old woman. “Please, we poured heart and soul into these things! They’re filled with our memories! I’m so sorry if we’ve offended you! Please, please!”

But the travelers continued to destroy the house. They refused to show mercy.

“Please, we’re just a pair of helpless old people. If it’s valuables you’re after, please take anything you like! But please, don’t destroy this house—it’s our

only shelter! Please!”

The travelers did not stop. They did not seem particularly emotional, snapping and smashing and crushing the things they saw as if they were doing routine exercises.

“How could you do this? Have we offended you somehow? We built this house with our own two hands...our memories...”

The old woman collapsed to the floor, sobbing. The old man went red with rage and grabbed one of the broomsticks. He brandished the end at the man, who was stomping on plates by the wall. But the travelers were more than five paces away, too far for him to reach.

“G-get out! Stop bothering us!”

The man glanced at the old man. Then he ignored him and grabbed the wall shelf, snapping it in half with both hands.

The woman gave him a look of disbelief and drew her revolver.

BANG.

There was another deafening noise.

Both the old woman crying on the floor and the man breaking the shelf looked up at the noise.

The old man died before he even had the chance to be surprised. His tall, thin frame crumpled on the floor. A .44mm bullet had gone through his temple. Blood gushed from the hole in his head.

The woman stood wordlessly, still holding the revolver.

“Agh.”

The old woman let out a funny gasp and scrambled to the corpse. She cradled its head in her arms and shook the body, letting the blood soak her clothes.

“AAAAAHHHH! AAAAAHHHH!”

When she realized that nothing would bring her husband back, the old woman screamed, howling like the wind.

The man stopped what he was doing and went to the woman, curious. That

was when the old woman rose.

“Ah...”

Her hands and chest were stained with blood. A peaceful smile hung on her lips.

“My, when did this room get so messy? I suppose I should start cleaning,” she said, grabbing the broom hanging from the pillar. “Yes, I should start cleaning —“

BANG.

The second round hit the old woman in the chest. Her tiny body flew comically far, hit a pillar, and spun before it landed on top of the old man.

Quietly, the woman holstered her revolver. Silence returned to the log cabin.

The man, who had been dramatically covering his ears, looked up. “That wasn’t like you at all, Master.”

“What do you mean?” asked the woman.

“They both had sticks, sure, but I don’t think that warranted killing them.”

The woman cast her gaze on broom the old man had been brandishing. “Don’t pick it up, but take a close look at the end of the shaft.”

The man took several steps towards the broom and examined it. “I see a small hole here.”

“Pick it up slowly. No sudden movements. Now aim the end at the wall over there and swing.”

Oblivious, the man swung the broom with his left hand.

Something zoomed forward and hit the wall. Flabbergasted, the man went to see what it was. A dart. His surprise mounting, he turned to the woman. “What is this?”

“Don’t touch it. It’s poisoned,” the woman said.

The man stood frozen for some time. He looked at the bodies on the ground, lying there like blood-soaked rags. He put his fingers into his mouth. The woman said, “There’s no point. We’re all right.”

“But...” the man trailed off, turning.

“The cups were fine. Unless our hosts took antidotes ahead of time, all of us would already be dead,” the woman said.

The man’s shoulders finally relaxed. “You really are a monster, Master,” he chuckled. The woman replied indifferently, but not angrily, “A woman’s only as capable as she is bold.”

“Let’s begin,” the woman said.

They began rummaging through the room. Opening up broken cabinets and dressers, looking under and behind the table, searching the cupboards, and even checking under the soaked corpses to look for trapdoors.

Once they cleared the living room, they moved on to the rest of the cabin. The search went on for some time.

The woman was opening up the drawers in the bedroom one by one and examining the clothes when the man called from outside.

“Master! Over here!”

He was standing at the start of a hallway that led into the metal section that used to be a vehicle. He was clearly rattled. “Master!”

“Did you find what they were hiding?”

“Yes. But...it’s not what we were looking for. And I think I’m going to be sick...”

Her curiosity piqued, the woman asked him where it was.

The man went down the hallway without a word and opened the wooden door.

Beyond was the metal box.

“This certainly isn’t what we were looking for,” the woman said. “I’m glad you agree,” the man mumbled.

The big metal box was shaped like a long, narrow hallway. The man had opened the skylight, which was the only light source in the room. Inside were the many things the old couple had made. They were indeed crafted of all-

natural materials.

The first things the woman saw were the legs hanging from the ceiling. Smoked human legs, hooked by the thighs and hanging in orderly pairs.

One wall was plastered entirely with leather. The bellybuttons and nipples indicated that they had once belonged to humans. Some sections were patched up with severed wrists.

Skewered to a pole sticking out of the floor was a human head, the eyes and mouth sewed shut. It had shrunk down to be much smaller than its original size, the hair tied into a tight braid.

Also in the room was a loveseat. Its legs were made of wood, but it was decorated with human bones. The seats and the backrest were made of human leather. On top of the backrest were four taxidermy heads, alternating between men and women. Their eyes had been replaced with glass beads. If two people sat down, they would practically rub cheeks with the heads. From behind, it might look like six people sitting cozily together.

At the foot of the seat was a rug, much like the ones made of whole bear or tiger skin. Naturally, it was made of human leather. Most likely a large man.

There was also a small, round table. The legs once belonged to humans. Set atop it were two bowls made of the top halves of human skulls, and forks made of finger bones.

A wooden shelf stood by the wall, and set on them were several large glass jars. They were filled with some sort of liquid and small heads. All children. Their wide, murky eyes stared at the woman. Their mouths were open and their tongues were lolling, pierced with thick needles. Another jar was stuffed with eyeballs. The edges of the shelf were decorated with ears.

“He said it was joy,” the man whispered, recalling the earlier conversation.

“I see,” the woman said.

She began to search the room. She moved the furniture around and peeled the leather off the surfaces. The man watched in horror from the doorway as she rummaged through the metal box.



Afterwards, she returned to the doorway indifferently. “Nothing but corpses in here.”

“Master, don’t you find this...unsettling?”

“Corpses can’t hurt me.”

“I suppose not, but...”

The woman looked round at the room. “If they’ve claimed this many travelers, they must have a stash of valuables somewhere. We’ll turn this place upside-down if we have to. That’s why we’re here, after all.”

“...And we’ll go into the night if we have to, is what you’re saying?”

The woman walked back through the hallway. “Yes. We’ll stay the night here.”

“Urgh...”

Left alone in the doorway, the man glanced at the box again. His eyes met those of a little girl in one of the jars. He gave her a wave and turned. And he did a double take.

“Huh?”

“You take that side,” the woman said, as she went through the old couple’s belongings like an expert burglar. The man followed her in and began searching the shelf by the bed. The furniture had been crafted with a master’s touch, and could fetch a good price on the market.

“I suppose taking the bed frame is out of the question,” the man admitted.

They continued to search the bedroom in silence, until they tapped on the floor and noticed a hidden space below. The man tore off the flooring and put his head inside. He came back up and shook his head.

“On to the next room,” the woman said, and came out into the hallway.

“Thank you.”

The woman asked, “Did you say something?”

“Hm? No.”

"Thank you," someone said again. The woman stopped.

"Thank you." "Thank you." "Thank you." "Thank you." "Thank you." "Thank  
you." "Thank you." "Thank you." "Thank you." "Thank you." "Thank you."  
"Thank you." "Thank you." "Thank you." "Thank you." "Thank you."

The voices continued on and on, like the sound of leaves rustling in a storm. The voices came layered together, from no direction in particular.

“What is this? Did they leave a gramophone running?” the woman demanded.

The man shrugged. “No, Master, this isn’t a gramophone. There they go again. I sensed them earlier, but now I can hear them.”

“What do you mean?”

The man seemed a little embarrassed. “Ghosts. Spirits. I’ve been seeing and hearing them since I was a child. The murdered travelers must be thanking us. But I’m surprised you can hear them too, Master—Master?”

The woman was briskly walking away.

“Master?”

She strode past the bodies in the living room, walked through the doorway and the beautiful potted flowers, and stepped into the pleasant summer sun.

“Master?” the man asked, rushing after her.

The woman was sitting in the driver's seat. She turned. "We're going."

“What? Wait, what about the stash?”

“They won’t be attacking any more travelers. That’ll be more than enough. And there’s always the chance that we won’t find anything even if we stay the night. If this couple was killing travelers for entertainment and not money, they’ve probably already thrown away their valuables.”

Confused, the man sat in the passenger seat. The little car began to rumble. “Well, not that this is a pressing concern, but Master...by any chance, are you —”

"No." The woman started the car.

“Not that this is a pressing concern, but...” he said, trailing off, and continued.

“What should I do about the one clinging to my back?”

Without even blinking, the woman pulled out her revolver. The man did not notice. “I think he wants to come with—”

BANG.

The woman opened fire without warning. The back-seat window shattered. The man flinched, his right ear still ringing. “Gah!”

Eyes wide open, he stared at the woman.

“Well?”

“Er...I think he’s gone...”

“Good. Let’s go.”

The woman put the car into gear and took off. The car climbed up the hill and disappeared into the forest.

A small creek ran through the woods.

Next to it stood a house. A handsome log cabin surrounded by lush grass and a vegetable patch. Beautiful flowers were in bloom on the raised porch next to the door. One of them had taken the full brunt of a .44mm round shot, and was spilling its contents on the plywood floor.

Things were sparkling among the clay pieces and the soil.

Countless gemstones lay in a pile on the deserted porch, glittering in the summer sun.





# Chapter 6: The Country of Liars -Waiting For You-

Travelers were only permitted through one of the gates.

The guards at the western gate informed Kino and Hermes that travelers were not permitted though, and pointed them to the road leading to the southern gate. Kino requested a three-day stay and was granted permission.

Kino pushed Hermes through the gates. Just inside was a forest sprawling with thick trees.

Red leaves carpeted the ground and the lone road leading further in. A cold wind shook both the branches and Kino's coat.

Just as Kino made to start Hermes, a man came running from the woods.

He was about thirty years of age, wearing a light button-down shirt and a thick indoor vest.

The man looked Kino in the eye. His face fell.

"What's with him?" Hermes wondered. "Who knows?" Kino replied.

Crossing his arms to warm himself, the man came up to Kino. "Hello, Traveler. Have you by any chance seen my beloved? Has she told you about me, or given you any messages for me?"

Kino shook her head.

"I see... My beloved had to leave on a journey five years ago. But she promised that she'd come back to me. So I'm waiting for her even now," the man explained without being prompted.

Soon, a woman in an apron came running up to them. She had short hair, and was about the same age as the man. In her hand was a warm jacket.

"Please don't rush out like that. It's getting cold; you'll get sick."

"Yes, you're right. I'm sorry. It's just that I thought she'd come back for me. But it wasn't her this time, either," the man replied, putting on the jacket.

Hermes quietly drew Kino's attention to something in the forest. A house surrounded by trees.

"Does everyone here live in the forest?" Kino asked.

"No, there's a city a little further north," the man replied. "This here is my housekeeper. She does a fine job keeping things in order, so I can spend my days waiting for my beloved to return. I owe her so much," the man said, and sneezed loudly.

"Let's get back inside now, or you really will catch cold," the housekeeper coaxed.

"Will it be much longer, do you think?" asked the man, "Until she comes back?"

"She'll come back someday. I promise. Now let's get you inside," said the housekeeper, giving the man a gentle push on the back.

The man turned to Kino one last time. "Are you sure you haven't seen her? You're not hiding anything, are you?"

Kino shook her head again.

"I see..."

Shoulders sagging, the man hung his head and went on his way. The housekeeper raised her voice, telling him to not trip on the way. She turned to Kino and whispered matter-of-factly, "I'm sorry, Traveler. He's not in his right mind. Whatever he asks you, just tell him you don't know anything."

"Really?"

The woman's tone softened. "Please excuse us. It's a short walk to the city. Take care of yourself; the road is bumpy."

Kino thanked the housekeeper and watched the pair depart. Then she started Hermes.

The next day started off with a light but cold rain.

Kino unfolded the collar of her coat and went around town to buy supplies. Afterwards, she went to a large restaurant for lunch. She asked permission to

bring Hermes inside, and propped him up by her table next to the door.

Soon they were swarmed by curious townspeople, most of whom had never seen a traveler. Kino spoke with them over tea.

When one of them asked if Kino had any questions, Hermes asked, “There was a man living in the woods by the gate. What’s wrong with him?”

The restaurant went quiet in an instant. People’s faces fell, eyes brimming with sadness.

There was a moment of silence.

“Er...he’s...he’s a pitiful man,” someone said. Everyone else nodded.

“I think I’m the best person to talk about this,” said a man about thirty years of age. The person sitting across from Kino agreed and gave him the seat.

“Hello, Traveler. I’m a friend of the man you met—we’ve known each other for over a decade. Now I work for the government,” he said solemnly.

The man explained that until five years ago, the country had been ruled by a tyrannical king, who was over thrown in a revolution.

“The two of us were in the police. He was a real good one, too; smart, skilled, and a good man, perfect for leading the revolution. They appointed him captain of the squad assigned to infiltrate the palace and kill the royal family. I was his subordinate,” the man said. “He had a girlfriend. A girl from a farm near the border. They met in town about a year before the revolution, when she was out selling vegetables. I was there too. They were getting along so well, I was sure they’d get married. But...”

The man paused there and breathed a heavy sigh.

“But the revolution was near. I asked him what would happen to her if he died. He didn’t answer. Not long after that, we got our orders. The date was set. And he told us that he’d broken up with the girl. She didn’t want to, he said, but he had no idea if he’d make it out alive, and he couldn’t tell her what he was about to do. So he broke it off. Told us that he’d lied to her.”

“I see. And the revolution must have succeeded,” Kino guessed.

The man nodded. “We killed the royal guards and charged into the palace.



That's when we happened across the royal family, just as they were getting ready to escape. All of us covered my friend, and he threw a bomb at the car. He was a hero."

"Then what happened?" Hermes asked.

The man continued sadly. "He saw something he shouldn't have."

"What?"

"The car was a mess. Their bodies were inside. The king, the queen, the two princes, and the princess. Everyone was cheering, but he looked at me. The princess—or her head, at least—it was his girlfriend."

"What?"

"She was the princess. She'd gone incognito to see the village, and fallen in love with him. No one knew. He was screaming like a madman."

"So his beloved is already gone," Kino concluded. Everyone nodded.

"He couldn't take it. The reality that he'd fallen in love with the princess he should have hated, and that he'd killed her with his own two hands. He should have been a hero, a central figure in our new government. But when he came to in the hospital, he was speaking nonsense. Wouldn't stop asking about his girlfriend, asking the doctor where she was. The doctor couldn't bear to tell him the truth, so he lied. He said that she'd gone on a journey, and that she promised to come back for him. It's common sense here that most people aren't allowed to leave these walls, but my friend was in so much pain that he doesn't even remember that. He moved to the forest, saying he'd wait for her. And he's been there for the last five years." The man continued, "The new government gave him a pension. Built him a house and hired housekeepers to take care of him. None of them lasted long, though. Saying living in the forest was uncomfortable, or that they couldn't bear to keep lying to him. And no one blames them."

"What about the one working for him now?" Kino asked.

"She's an outlander like you. My men and I were on patrol outside the walls three years ago when we found a group of travelers dying by the roadside. Some of them decided to settle here for good. I thought someone who didn't

know about our history would have an easier time working for my friend, so I hired her. And she's doing a fine job."

"I see."

"He'll be that way forever. Never going to get his sanity back. Although that might be for the best," the man said with a dry smile.

A middle-aged woman in the back continued for him. "That's why we're lying to our hero to this day. And we'll keep lying to him. He'll be waiting for a girl who's never going to return...until his dying day."

The next day. It was the third day of Kino's stay in the country.

The sky was clear. Kino had breakfast, packed her things, and set off for the southern gate.

The path through the woods was still wet with rainwater. Kino rode very carefully.

Along the way, she spotted a horse-drawn carriage stuck in the mud. The housekeeper was driving it.

"You're up, Kino," said Hermes.

"Oh well. It's not like my boots'll stay clean forever."

Kino climbed off Hermes and marched through the mud to help the housekeeper push the carriage free. Then they headed for the gate together.

The housekeeper thanked Kino. Hermes told her that they had heard the story from the townspeople the previous day.

"I see..." she trailed off. Kino and Hermes got ready to leave, when she stopped them. "Please wait a moment," she said. "Let me serve you some tea to thank you for your help. And let's get those boots of yours polished."

The housekeeper led Kino and Hermes to the cabin in the forest. The man was on the roof making repairs. The housekeeper explained that Kino and Hermes had helped her, and asked him for permission to have them over for tea. The man agreed wholeheartedly.

Kino cleaned Hermes and her boots by the well and was led into a large room.

The man quickly joined them, and the housekeeper served them tea. She placed the steaming cups on the table.

“That’s an interesting aroma. What is this tea?” Kino asked.

The man replied, “I’m not sure, but it’s delicious.” He grabbed the tea placed before Kino and took it for himself. And he gave her a smile. “It’s very good.”

Kino took another cup and drank. “It really is.”

“Say,” the man began, “You’ll be traveling to all kinds of places, won’t you? If you happen to see my beloved on the way—”

“We’ll make sure to tell her about you. That you’re waiting for her.”

“Thank you,” the man said, smiling.

“Oh my,” the housekeeper exclaimed, bringing in a tray of biscuits. “Is someone at the gate again? I think I hear engines.”

The man stopped mid-sip and leapt to his feet. “It might be her! I’ll go have a look!”

“Please, your jacket!” the housekeeper said. The man nodded and left without putting it on.

When the door closed shut, the housekeeper took a seat. She put a blanket over her lap and sat comfortably, sipping her own cup of tea.

“Is this okay?” Hermes asked. “I don’t hear any engines.”

“Yes. I couldn’t very well talk to you if he were around. He’ll be gone for a while.”

Kino looked at the housekeeper.

“I’m happy with this. My parents and my brothers made it safely to the next country over. They’re happy, they’re safe. And I can be with the man I love,” the housekeeper said with a smile.

Tentatively, Kino asked, “You’re the former princess?”

The housekeeper nodded.

“That’s interesting. Tell us more,” said Hermes.

Kino looked into the woman's eyes. The woman picked up her teacup, took a sip, and put it on the table again. Then she broke her silence.

"I was the daughter of this country's king. The princess, until five years ago. I received a report from our spies among the commoners saying that there were signs of a revolution. So I personally approached that man to get information for my father. I would learn the date of their planned revolution, so we could flee to the neighboring country with our assets."

Kino and Hermes listened on.

"But I became fond of how he loved me. And I fell in love with him. After a while, I didn't need to put on an act for him, except for the act of being an ordinary village girl. We could be together whenever time allowed. Not long, but each and every second we spent together was like bliss. I wished those days would go on forever."

The woman smiled, but only for a moment.

"But they came to an end. He gave me the information I needed."

"By breaking up with you for seemingly no reason. That was enough to tell you that the revolution was near," Kino hypothesized.

"Yes. I told my father everything. And I chose to go with my family, without opposing them or petitioning to stay. Our doubles served us faithfully. Everything went according to plan. And I tried to forget him. After all, I thought I'd never see him again."

"But you came back."

The woman nodded.

"Our spies here continued to feed us information. I'd prayed that my beloved would survive the battle, and he did. But I also learned from the spies that he had lost his mind after thinking he'd killed me. That he needed someone to take care of him. So I made my decision."

"I get it," Hermes said.

The woman gave a nostalgic smile. "It was hard work—convincing my parents, disguising myself as a traveler, getting myself hired as a housekeeper... Even

now, my parents tell me I'm welcome to rejoin them anytime."

Kino said, "How did he respond when he saw you again?"

"I'm in your care until the day she returns to me'. I was so happy to hear those words."

"Really?" asked Hermes.

"Yes." The woman nodded. "I still love him, and he's still waiting for me. And he's always with me. I've been lying to him since the moment we met—and I'll keep lying to him as we live on together. I'm...I'm happy with that."

"Thank you for telling us your story." "Yeah. Thanks," said Kino and Hermes.

Soon the door opened and the man returned, shivering. The housekeeper rose from her seat.

"It wasn't her. The gatekeeper was just starting the generator... She wasn't here after all..."

"I'm so sorry to hear that."

The housekeeper gave the man her seat, and put her blanket around his shoulders. She reached for the teapot.

"When do you think she'll return to me?" he murmured.

"I don't know, but I'm sure she'll come back to you one day."

The man looked her in the eye. "I'm scared. What if she's forgotten me?"

The housekeeper's hand stopped mid-pour. She slowly shook her head. And she smiled, giving him the same answer as the rest of the country.

"No. She hasn't forgotten you. She never will."

The man and the housekeeper said goodbye to Kino and Hermes at the gate and walked back to the house together.

"They're gone," the man said, "Do you think they'll tell her about me?"

The housekeeper gave him a bright smile and assured him that they would.

That was when, without warning, the man turned. "I hear an engine! Someone must be here!"

He rushed off to the gate.

“No, that’s probably Hermes—” the housekeeper began, but she stopped and went back to the house alone.

She cleaned up the teacups on the table and wondered to herself, “I wonder what I should make for lunch?”

“Behind us, Kino.”

Kino had just warmed up Hermes’ engine and was about to leave, when she turned and saw the man running over to them. The guards tried to stop him, but the man desperately pleaded with them. They gave in and allowed the man to pass.

Wearing his jacket, the man ran to Kino and Hermes as quickly as he could.

“Wait! I want to tell you something!” he said, bending forward and gasping for breath. “I need to tell you something.”

“You want us to tell your beloved about you, right?” Kino said.

The man looked up. “No. This is a message from me to you. There’s something you need to know.” He stood up straight.

Kino looked up at the man. He stood tall and confident.

“This is fine,” he said. “I’m happy with this. I don’t want to break anything anymore. Not my friend, who turned out to be a royalist spy, and not the hearts of the people who’re kind enough to play along with the lie. Not the successes of the revolution and the new administration. And not this new life I have with my beloved, who wasn’t lying about her love, either. I don’t need to break anything anymore. I’m happy now.”

“...You’re...” Kino trailed off. Hermes continued for her. “A liar. Everyone here is a liar.”

The man grinned, his back to the gate. And he nodded again and again.

“Goodbye. I should get back now.”

“Goodbye. Take care of yourselves.” “Goodbye, Mister Hero. Tell your housekeeper goodbye for us, too.”

The man turned around and walked back to his country. The guards welcomed him back with relief and ushered him inside.

Kino watched him disappear through the gate, and finally said, "Let's go."







# Epilogue: To Do Something - A -Life goes on - A-

The forest was vast, covering the endless land to the edges of the horizon. It was deep, dark, and labyrinthine, with many different trees twisting inside.

The road ran through the forest, running in a straight line that bisected the woods. It drew a brown line in the thick green world, and was just wide enough for two cars or horse-drawn carriages.

Inside the forest, next to the road, was a vegetable patch and a cabin.

The long, narrow vegetable patch ran parallel to the road, surrounding several tall trees. Half the patch was empty, but spinach was growing on a raised platform on the other half. At the end of the patch was the small cabin.

The cabin had a set of doors, and large windows to its either side. Sturdy plywood terraces stood in front of the doors and the window on the opposite side of the house. A small stable stood next to the house, but there wasn't a horse in sight.

Without warning, one of the windows opened.

It was followed by the next window over, then the next, and all the rest, each followed by a pair of hands propping the windows open. Finally, the front doors swung wide and a girl stepped outside.

She was in her early teens, a little tall for her age. Her black shoulder-length hair was tied up in a ponytail. She wore lace-up boots and light brown pants with legs that had been rolled up many times over because they were too big for her. She wore a green cotton vest over her white button-down shirt.

The girl was holding a bedsheet under her arm. She hung it up on the rope strung up on the terrace by the door and secured it with a pair of wooden clips. The bedsheet fluttered in the breeze.

Raising her arms, the girl stretched. The cabin and the vegetable patch had cleared away part of the forest, opening up just as much of the sky. The girl

looked up. It was morning, and the sky was a clear blue. The sun had just begun to rise over the horizon, its rays splitting endlessly between the branches sticking out of the woods. Birds were twittering and singing.

“The weather’s great today,” chirped the girl.

She went back inside, then came out pushing a motorrad. The motorrad had a luggage rack atop its rear wheel, with a pair of black compartments hanging from either side.

The girl pushed the motorrad onto the terrace, which was a little narrow for both of them at the same time. Although she wobbled once, she quickly caught her balance.

“There...” she gasped, propping up the motorrad on its center stand. “Wake up! It’s morning!” she cried, pounding her fists against the seat. Some time passed before the motorrad finally spoke.

“Huh? Okay, all right already. It’s really morning now?” the motorrad groaned. The girl stopped hitting him. “Couldn’t you be a little gentler? All this hitting’s going to—”

“The weather’s great today, don’t you think?”

“Are you listening to me?”

“I am. It’s your fault for not waking up before I started hitting you,” the girl giggled. “Good morning, Hermes.”

“Good morning, Kino,” Hermes replied.

Kino nodded and turned to the door. There was a flash of long hair—an elderly woman, stepping outside.

The girl smiled. “Good morning, Master.”

“Good morning. The weather’s looking quite lovely today,” the old woman said, holding a bedsheet in her arms.

In spite of her age, the slender old woman stood perfectly straight. Her long silver hair was tied in a ponytail, and she wore tight pants and a white button-down shirt with a light green cardigan. What seemed to be a small leather pouch hung from the back of the belt, with the cardigan falling on top of it.

But what the cardigan really hung over was a covered holster. It contained a small large-caliber hand persuader with a short barrel, a revolver ready to be drawn by a right-handed shooter.

“Do you remember what we said we would do if the weather agreed today?” asked the old woman, hanging up the sheets.

“Yes, Master,” said the girl, “We’re chopping down a tree today, and buying supplies from the merchant when he comes by later in the afternoon.”

The old woman gave a satisfied nod. “Very good. We’ll chop down the tree in the afternoon, after lunch. Shall we do some marksmanship practice until then?”

“Yes!” the girl replied, adding, “Should I make breakfast today too?”

The old woman smiled, face imperceptibly stiff. “Leave the cooking to me. It’s one of my joys in life.”

“You sure do love cooking, Master,” the girl chuckled.

The cabin door led straight into the living room. A small log table and three chairs sat in the middle, and a steel stove with a brick base took up a corner. A chimney led from the stove out through the wall.

The girl rushed inside, putting firewood and wood chips into the stove. She lit a match and set the kindling alight. Once the flames had grown strong and steady, she shut the tiny stove door.

She turned and spotted a coat.

It was long and brown, hung up next to the door so she could easily grab it and go.

The girl stared quietly at the coat.

Then she opened the door and left to call the old woman inside.

There was a small table on the terrace by the door. It was rather wide, wooden with foldable legs.

On the table was a hand persuader, giving off a dull glint in the risen sun. A large-caliber revolver with a slender but long barrel.

Next to it was a paper box stuffed with bullets, a small bottle of green liquid propellant, and a wooden case filled with knickknacks and cleaning tools.

Across the road was a thick piece of plywood hanging between the trees, parallel to the ground. A small, rusted frying pan was suspended under it, secured perpendicular to the ground by a strong rope.

The girl stood in front of the table and picked up the revolver. It was a little heavy in her hands, but she lifted it and checked to see it was not loaded. Then she cocked the persuader and pulled the trigger, then repeated her actions to make sure it was in working order.

“Loading,” said the girl. From behind, the old woman gave her approval. Above them was Hermes, propped up on his center stand, and two bedsheets fluttering in the breeze.

With her right thumb, the girl half-cocked the revolver. She held the body with her left hand and fixed her grip on the persuader. Then she injected the liquid propellant into the cylinder with a syringe. Turning the cylinder with her left thumb, she loaded all six chambers.

The old woman advised, “More propellant does mean more power, but it also means more recoil. That much should be just enough for you at this stage. I’ll let you use more once you’re used to the force. However, make sure to add enough that the bullet doesn’t get stuck in the barrel. If it does, you must not pull the trigger again.”

“Right,” the girl replied, and loaded a thick piece of cloth and a .44 caliber round. The lever in front of the barrel folded forwards and the breech block pushed the round inside. Five repetitions later, the revolver was fully loaded. Finally, the girl dipped her finger into the lubricant jar and slathered it over the chambers as though putting lids on them. She wiped her fingers clean with a rag, and pushed percussion caps into the back of the cylinder at the points that made contact with the hammer. The sparks lit in those spots would light the propellant, leading to the bullet being expelled.

It took some time for her to complete the process, but the persuader was finally ready to be fired six times.

The girl gingerly placed the revolver on the table, making sure the barrel was

pointed away from herself.

“I’m ready, Master. The lane is clear. May I open fire?” she asked, eyes still forward.

“You’ve forgotten again.”

The old woman took out two small cotton balls from her pocket and went to the girl. She plugged them into her ears.

“Ah, sorry, Master. Thank you,” the girl said with an embarrassed laugh, still looking straight ahead.

The old woman plugged her own ears as well and said, “You may begin.”

Slowly, the girl picked up the revolver, making sure her right trigger finger was held absolutely straight. Then she put her right hand over her left and held her arms in front of her, her right arm outstretched and her left slightly bent inwards. She stepped out with her right foot, her body angled diagonally to her target, and her face looking at the frying pan directly.

The muzzle was pointed directly at the frying pan. Her left thumb cocked the persuader all the way. The cylinder turned, bringing the barrel and one of the chambers into alignment. She hooked her right index finger on the trigger.

*BANG.*

There was a dull, heavy noise, and a puff of white smoke. The revolver and the girl’s arms bounced upwards. For an instant, sparks were flying—and the frying pan began spinning into a blur, the rope rapidly twisting clockwise.

There was another noise, and suddenly, the frying pan was still. The second shot had hit the exact opposite side of the first and ended the spinning.

The third shot struck the pan dead in the center, pushing it back. The frying pan swung back and forth, until the fourth shot forced it still. The fifth pushed it back again. As it swung forward again and back, the sixth bullet found its mark.

This time, the frying pan swung all the way up, hit the plywood, and fell forward.

The girl stood on her toes to reach up to the frying pan, and tossed it up to undo the loop. It rose into the air and fell limply down. The girl tossed it again.

“Mmph.”

She glared at the disobedient pan.

Then she tried again. And failed again.

The old woman watched from the terrace, arms folded.

“How is she?” Hermes asked from behind her.

“The same.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I was right about her marksmanship skills.” the old woman paused, exhaling softly. “She’s a genius. You find people like her once in a while—people with a knack for shooting. Age or gender has nothing to do with it; she was born with exceptional talent. It’s ironic that geniuses like her usually don’t turn out to have had a passion for persuaders.”

The girl hopped up and volleyed the frying pan into the air. It hit the plywood, spun once, and fell down again. The girl scrambled away to avoid getting hit.

“You’d prefer to have a talented student anyway, being called ‘Master’ and all that, right?” Hermes said.

“Of course,” replied the old woman. “It makes the teaching worthwhile. With a little instruction, she’ll be an expert in no time.”

“I wish I could say the same about her driving.”

“That’s your responsibility, Hermes. Have her practice more. But...”

“But?”

The old woman continued, back still turned, “Remember, a good rider does not a race winner make. I suppose that’s one thing I worry about for her future.”

Hermes fell silent for a time.

“You mean being a good markswoman doesn’t mean she’s going to make it out of shootouts alive?”

The old woman turned. “Very good, Hermes. Would you like some

marksmanship instructions yourself? What do you say to automatic cannons on your headlight and exhaust pipe?"

"No thank you," Hermes said.

The old woman looked forward again. "Living in a safe country requires the willingness to cooperate and make compromises. And surviving in a lawless world requires the willingness to kill for survival."

"Have you told her?"

"She wouldn't understand even if I did; in fact, she might agonize too much over the idea, whether she's safe or in danger. She has to learn for herself."

By the time the old woman had finished, the girl was bounding back to the terrace. "Master, may I try again?"

The old woman smiled and nodded.

"This is one thing I simply can't teach you," said the old woman.

The sun was high up in the sky and the weather was warm. Hermes stood on the road before the cabin, engine roaring across the woods. The girl stood next to him, wearing a thick brown leather jacket with a leather riding helmet and a small pair of goggles. She wore thick gloves, and had sturdy rags wrapped like bandages around her knees.

"I was quite the rider at one point, but I'm not sure I can manage anymore," the old woman added.

"I wish I knew what you were like back when you were traveling, Master," said the girl, and added with a giggle, "I bet you were just as nice as now!"

A brief silence fell over them, with only Hermes' engine running in the background. The sky was blue, and the forest was a vibrant green.

Finally:

"Perhaps I was," the old woman said without an ounce of humor.

The girl gave the gas lever a gentle pull. "Ready, Hermes?"

"Yep," Hermes replied, "Start off slow, okay? Today we're going to practice braking at high speed. Don't rush it, though."



“Okay.”

The girl climbed onto Hermes and kicked up the side stand.

“Let’s go!”

The girl did as instructed, starting off slowly down the road. Then—

“Ack! Wait! Don’t speed up that quickly!”

Hermes zoomed away as the old woman watched, leaving in a trail of dust, tire tracks, and motorrad screams.

Only after the woman had set up a folding chair on the terrace and sat back to look up at the sky did Hermes and the girl return. The girl’s coat was not covered in dirt.

The motorrad’s brake screeched before the house as he drifted slightly to the side in another cloud of dust.

“Want to try again?” asked the girl.

The motorrad refused her immediately.

“Really? Okay. Thanks, Hermes,” the girl replied, and turned off his engine. The world went quiet again.

The girl pushed Hermes towards the cabin and propped him up on his center stand in front of the terrace. “I’ll give you a nice wash later.”

“Glad to hear that,” Hermes replied, exhausted.

The old woman told the girl to change into clean clothes. The girl gave a spirited response and strode inside.

“Well? Do you find the teaching worthwhile?” asked the old woman.

Hermes replied, “You should teach her instead of me.”

“No.”

The two bedsheets shook in the breeze.

“Okay, you’ve gotten the hang of moving and stopping, so let’s practice picking me up off the ground,” said Hermes.

The girl had changed into her green cotton jacket, dressed the same as the

morning with the addition of a pair of gloves. Sunlight glinted off Hermes' fuel tank.

"Right," the girl replied. "What do I do?"

"Let's go over there. See that patch of dirt on the right?" Hermes said.

The girl stood on his left side, took hold of the handles, and pushed it up next to the vegetable patch. The dirt was softer than the ground but not enough for the motorrad to sink in. They were far enough from the terrace that Hermes would not hit it when he fell.

"Yep. This spot should work. Remember, you shouldn't be allowed to ride a motorrad if you can't stand it up on your own wherever and whenever. You're actually supposed to learn that before you start riding, but it's a little late for that. We'll start practicing now so you can stand me up whether I fall to my right or my left."

"All right. Let's do it."

"Okay. Tip me over."

"Yeah!" the girl replied, taking her hands off the handlebars. She gave the motorrad a push.

"Huh? Wait! Hold on!"

Gravity dragged Hermes to the ground. The end of his handlebar was driven into the dirt.

"Done," said the girl.

"You were supposed to do that *slowly*," Hermes complained.

The girl practiced standing Hermes up several times from either side.

She would slowly tip him over, pull him back up, and prop him up on his center stand. If she was standing him up from his right side, she would pull out his side stand with her hand to make sure he didn't tip over to the left as soon as he was standing upright again.

"You've improved. I think you've got the hang of it, so next time we'll try on a slope," Hermes said. The girl had worked up a sweat from the practice.

“Lunch is ready,” the old woman said from the terrace.

“Right! I’ll be right there, Master!” the girl replied, turning.

“I know you won’t forget, but could you please stand me back up before you go?” Hermes asked, still lying on his side, “Please?!”

“After lunch, we’ll go chop down the tree standing between the forest and the vegetable patch. We’ll be using the wood at home later,” said the old woman.

She and the girl were sitting across from one another at the table on the terrace. They each had large food trays divided into halves, with one side divided yet again into halves. In the biggest section was a thick ham steak topped with blueberry sauce, in the middle section was a roasted potato, and in the far section were boiled carrots. The old woman picked up her knife—black and matte and clearly for assassination or battle—and cut up a carrot, which she stuck on a fork and popped into her mouth.

The girl poured herself a mug of tea and asked, “Will we be using a saw? Or axes?”

The old woman shook her head. “A tree that thick won’t go down so easily. And we could easily get hurt when it falls. Most people use chainsaws for that kind of work.”

“Do we have one?” the girl asked, a tiny piece of ham stuck on her fork.

“No,” replied the old woman.

Confused, the girl brought the ham into her mouth.

A series of heavy noises rattled the forest.

The sound of persuaders firing in such quick succession that they sounded like one long noise.

Wood chips began flying from the trunk near the base, as though the trunk were being chiseled away at by a giant, invisible beaver. By the time the noise had stopped, a deep gash ran across its width.

A tripod stood on the ground ahead of the terrace, where the girl had earlier practiced pulling up her motorrad. It was made of thick green pipes, all three

legs secured firmly in the ground. Mounted atop it was an automatic rapid-fire persuader aimed directly at the tree.

A thick piece of cloth was spread under the tripod, with many empty cartridges scattered atop it. Next to the tripod were boxes of wood and metal, and a shovel that had been stuck into the earth.

The old woman was bent over the tripod, wearing ear plugs. She peered into the sight next to the persuader, and made minute adjustments to the aim with the dials and levers at the back of the tripod.

Then came another elongated gunshot. A storm of bullets tore through the air over the vegetable patch and this time ate away at the other side of the tree trunk in a shower of wood chips.

When the final gunshot faded, the tree began tilting towards the first large gash. What little remained of the carved section slowly began to break. The tall tree fell slowly, scattering leaves everywhere.

It hit the ground with a heavy thud, bouncing up once before falling again, landing parallel to the vegetable patch in the border between the patch and the forest. The ground shook.

The girl stood on the terrace with her hands over her ears, eyes wide open. Hermes stood above, propped up on his center stand.

The bedsheets on the terrace were gone, replaced by a small towel. Hanging next to it were the two trays from lunchtime, hanging up by small metal rings attached to holes in their corners. It was past noon, and several white clouds were drifting past at a leisurely pace.

“Perfect,” the old woman muttered. A plume of white smoke rose from the hot persuader on the tripod, and over 200 empty cartridges from just over ten seconds of fire clattered in a pile below like a mound of sand. “Finished,” she said, taking out her earplugs.

The girl cheered. “That was amazing!”

Hermes mumbled to himself, “This is ridiculous. But I guess it’s better than turning a motorrad engine into a chainsaw.”

“What do we do with the tree, Master?” the girl asked, looking at the tree and its intact branches and leaves.

“We’ll leave it there for now.”

The girl was shocked. “Really?”

“Yes. We leave it as is, so the moisture in the trunk escapes the tree through the branches and the leaves. Give it some time to dry completely, and it’ll be beautiful and perfect for woodworking.”

“Wow,” the girl said, impressed.

The old woman added with a laugh, “So we shouldn’t shoot at it anymore.”

The old woman waited for the mountain of cartridges to cool before shoveling them into the wooden box. The girl went to pick up the ones that had flown off.

Finally, the old woman covered the persuader and the tripod with a large piece of waterproof canvas. She picked up the metal case to put away the remaining cartridges. The girl walked up to the terrace.

“Done.”

“Good job,” said Hermes.

“I barely did anything, though,” the girl replied, leaning against him and slowly looking up at the sky.

A gentle breeze shook her hair.

The fluffy clouds seemed to have multiplied, but the sky was still clear and vividly blue. The clouds drifted in total silence, and the girl wondered if she were the one moving and not them.

“Kino? Kino,” the old woman called from the door.

The girl was still looking up at the sky.

“She’s calling you,” Hermes said loudly. Jolted, the girl looked back down. “Who? Me?”

“Yes, Kino,” the old woman said gently, standing in front of her.

“Oh, right. I’m sorry, it still feels like you’re calling for someone else and not me,” the girl chuckled, embarrassed and a little sad. “I keep remembering Kino, you see...”

The smile faded from her face. The girl looked down, gaze locked on the terrace floor and the old woman’s feet.

The old woman placed a hand on her shoulder. The girl looked up in surprise.

“You’ll grow used to it soon. ‘Kino’ is a lovely name—it’s short, easy to say, and nice to pronounce.”

“I think so too!” the girl said brightly.

“And to me, you’re the only Kino in the world. You are Kino.”

“I am Kino...” the girl echoed. “But! But you know, Master?” she asked, looking up at the old woman with her fists shaking. “I think ‘Kino’ goes better with a masculine pronoun!(1) Maybe it’s because that’s the way I first heard it, but it just feels wrought, you know?”

“It feels ‘right’, you mean?” Hermes asked.

“Yeah, that!” Kino replied immediately.

“I’m sure you’ll grow used to that soon too,” the old woman said, “You can’t change everything overnight, so take your time—just like we’ll be taking our time waiting for the tree to dry out. Winter will come, and spring will pass... You’ll have plenty of time to think things over.”

“By the way, ‘Master’ is such a strange name, Master. Does it mean something special?”

The old woman stopped taking the dried towel off the line and turned. “Pardon me?”

“What does ‘Master’ mean, Master? I always thought it was a funny name. Or maybe it’s perfectly normal in other countries?”

The old woman and Hermes were silent. A cool breeze blew between them all.

Finally, the old woman neatly folded up the towel. “Let’s go inside and sit

down, Kino. It seems there's more I still need to teach you."

"Huh? Okay."

They disappeared into the house.

Hermes could make out bits and pieces of their conversation. Then came the revelation.

"WHAT?!" the girl cried, "You mean 'Master' isn't your name?!"

"Oh, Kino." Hermes sighed.

Hermes remained on the terrace. He could hear the gentle breeze and the voices coming from the house.

"I think it's time for afternoon tea."

"Leave it to me, Master. I'll steep it just the way you taught me."

"All right. I'm counting on you."

Then came the sound of the stove and boiling water.

"Maybe I should take a nap," Hermes mumbled.

"Done! Here you go."

"Thank you. Mmm, I love the scent. What tea is this?"

"Er, I don't know what it says, but I used the one in the red tin. I remember you made tea with it last time and I really liked it."

"Ah, the apple. Thank you very much."

"No problem."

The clouds grew thicker, expanding into one big mass. Hermes mumbled to himself again, wondering if it would be overcast the next day.

"What would you like to do if we have pleasant weather tomorrow?" asked the old woman.

"We can air the mattresses!" the girl responded immediately.

The sun had begun tilting westward.

"Wake up!" the girl cried, slamming a fist down on Hermes' seat.

“Okay, all right already... It’s morning now?”

“Nope,” the girl replied, “it’s almost time for the merchant to come by. You have to move.” She pushed Hermes forward, raising the stand and giving him a push again. He began sliding off the terrace. The girl climbed atop him and rode on the dirt, then turned to slot Hermes in between the terrace and the road.

“That’s nice. But you didn’t have to wake me up for this,” Hermes complained.

Soon, a carriage came into view in the distance. It was far down the road, where everything in the general direction was clearly visible. The old woman came outside and looked out from the lane.

“He’s here.”

“I’ll get ready,” the girl said, running off to the stable.

Two horses stopped in front of the terrace. The carriage driver was a well-built middle-aged man with a beard. He wore overalls and a leather jacket, and had holsters containing automatic hand persuaders under each arm. Several wooden crates were secured in a pile in the back of the carriage.

“Good afternoon,” said the old woman, “Thank you for coming all this way.”

The man stepped off the carriage and gave the old woman a slight bow. He took out a piece of plywood and put it up like a ramp between the carriage and the terrace.

“Hup!”

Slowly, the man pushed the crates down the makeshift ramp.

The girl put down a trough for the horses, and busily went between them and the well behind the house to water the other trough.

On the terrace, the man began opening up the crates one by one. He started with the one without a lid.

“The same vegetables as the usual. I brought you bacon for meat this time, and you’ll find eggs in here too. But make sure to finish them quick. I’ve also got lots of jam from the ladies,” he said, and moved on to the ones that had been nailed shut. “Here’s the liquid propellant and the fuel. I made sure to pick up



extra in case the weather gets nasty. Take a look.”

“It’s all right, thank you.”

The man glanced at the tripod set up on the ground. The old woman had already put the persuader away.

“How was the new automatic rapid-fire persuader?” he asked excitedly.

“It was quite lovely,” the old woman replied, “I have nothing to complain about, at least with the functionality. It’ll be hard to use without a tripod for smaller shooters, but that’s all I can think of. It’s a beautiful model.”

“I’m glad to hear that. The engineers back home will be pleased, too,” the man said, smiling.

“I chopped down a tree with it,” the old woman said.

The man turned. “Oh. ...Well, ahem. I won’t be reporting that part,” he said uncomfortably.

The old woman said, “It’s just too much trouble to make all the calculations for using explosives at my age, you know.”

“If you need any help with heavy lifting, please don’t hesitate to ask. We can have men here to help out at a moment’s notice.”

“I will, if I ever need to.”

The man stole a quick look at the girl, who was feeding and watering the horses from the terrace. He turned to the old woman. “Er... Pardon me for asking again, but do you really have no intention of settling in our country? Everyone would welcome you with open arms.”

“Like I said,” the old woman replied, “I’m very grateful for the offer, but I have no intention of doing so. I even have a companion here now.”

But the man refused to budge. “I realize this may be premature, but what will happen to the girl in the future? Will she live all alone here in the woods with her motorrad?”

“That’s for her to decide,” the old woman said firmly, “It’s up to her to figure out what she wants to do with her life. If she chooses to spend the rest of her

days here, we should respect her decision.”

The man, who stood very tall next to her, quietly let his shoulders fall. “Please let me know if you ever need anything.”

“I will, if I ever need to.”

The man picked up the crates and began moving them into the house. Then he came back out with the crates, this time empty, and loaded them on the carriage before finally folding up and putting away the tripod with the old woman.

“Here you are,” the girl said, serving the man a cup of tea.

The man was sitting in the living room, having taken off his jacket. The old woman sat across from him. The girl put her own cup next to her and took a seat.

“Thank you,” the man said, “Ah, it smells wonderful. What tea is this?”

Smiling, the girl replied that it was the apple tea he had brought them before. She picked up her mug with both hands and took a sip. The man gave the old woman a quick toast and drank the tea as well.

Time passed in relaxing conversation. The man explained his country’s situation to the old woman and noted down his next delivery date and the things he was to bring.

“I’d better get going before it gets dark,” he said, “Thank you for the tea.” The man stood and picked up his jacket. The old woman and the girl also got up to see him off.

“Hm?”

The man stopped. His eyes were locked on the brown coat hanging by the door. The girl froze.

“I saw someone wearing a coat just like this not too long ago. I knew it looked familiar.”

The girl’s breath caught in her throat. The old woman asked, “Oh? Tell us more about this person.”

“He already left. Apparently every traveler from his country wears it, because it’s the only thing sturdy enough. He was laughing about how it lets them recognize fellow countrymen no matter where they are.” The man continued, oblivious to the girl’s stare, “I’ve been there before to trade. It’s a pretty normal place, not too far.”

“Where?!” the girl demanded.

“Whoa!”

“Where is the country? Please tell me!”

Flabbergasted, the man looked from the girl to the old woman. The old woman said nothing.

“Please! Where is this country?!” the girl demanded again.

“So you’re gonna go?” Hermes asked, adding, “I guess you wouldn’t be doing this if you weren’t.”

The girl was fueling Hermes on the terrace. She held up the container with both hands and tipped its contents into Hermes’ tank. The sun had almost disappeared over the horizon, and the sky had darkened with clouds.

“Hey! That’s enough!” Hermes yelled.

The girl rushed to pull the container down. She tightly capped the brimming tank.

“Are you really gonna go?” asked Hermes.

Earlier:

“Like I said,” said the man, “It’s nearby.”

The girl pounced with another question. “Can I get there by motorrad? Can a motorrad make the trip?”

“Hm? Yeah. We went by carriage, but the road is decent outside of the rainy season. But...”

“How long does it take?”

The man looked at the old woman. “Well... It’s a two-day trip by carriage. We left in the afternoon and arrived in the afternoon. I think a motorrad might be

able to make it in a day. There's a flat road through the woods; you just have to follow it all the way. It never forks, so you won't get lost. Does that answer your question?"

The girl nodded again and again. "Yes! Thank you... Thank you...!"

They saw off the merchant together.

"I understand how you feel," said the old woman.

"I want to go, Master," the girl pleaded, "I have to do it, no matter what. May I? Please?"

The old woman nodded. "It's your life to live; I won't try to stop you. But I can't promise that it will all turn out for the best. Or the worst, either." Then she said to the girl, "Are you sure?"

"I'm going," the girl replied to Hermes.

"Let me help," the old woman said, stepping outside. The girl followed her, pushing Hermes inside. Just as she was propping him up by the door, far from the lamp and the stove, the old woman came out of one of the rooms with a large leather suitcase.

She put down the suitcase and took out a set of neatly folded clothes. Black pants and a black jacket. Both were made of hardy fabrics, and each came with belts of their own. She also handed the girl a cap with ear flaps and a pair of goggles with stronger frames than ones for horseback riding.

"Put these on. Your usual clothes weren't made for traveling. I got the merchant to pick up perfect riding clothes for you."

The girl looked up. "Master..."

"I was actually holding on to these for your birthday, but we can't wait for that, can't we? So here's your early birthday present."

"Oh..." The girl gasped, ready to thank the old woman, but was interrupted.

"Take this, too," the old woman said, taking out a holster from the cabinet. It was long and made to be tied on a belt. Inside was the large-caliber revolver the girl had used during training.

“But Master, this is—“

“Yes. Make sure to load it and prepare plenty of spare rounds before you set off with this on your belt tomorrow. You’ll need it to protect yourself.”

“But...” The girl hesitated. “But is that okay? This persuader’s so important to you. You traveled with it for ages.”

The old woman grinned. “It certainly is. Which is why—“ She took out a black, intricately carved wooden box from the suitcase. She put it on the table, entered the combination, and opened the lid.

“Wow...”

“There’s nothing to worry about,” said the old woman, “I’m only lending you one of my precious persuaders.”

A piece of cloth lined the bottom of the box, which was divided into multiple compartments. Inside were three identical revolvers and six spare cylinders.

“You’ll need a suitcase for your things, too. Why don’t you take this one? It’ll fit on Hermes’ luggage rack. I’ll lend it to you too.”

The girl looked up at the old woman.

“Master...”

“Yes?”

“Thank you. I don’t know what to say...”

The old woman placed her hands on the girl’s shoulders.

“It’s too early to be thanking me. We have no idea what will happen, do we? You might regret getting my help; you might think that things wouldn’t have turned out so badly if I hadn’t lent you all these things.”

The girl went silent.

“But maybe nothing of the sort will happen. It’s all up to you, Kino. I won’t regret helping you today. And I will wish you good fortune.”

The next morning.

Fast-moving clouds covered the sky. It was past daybreak, but the sun was

hidden. There was no rain.

On the terrace, Hermes' engine was running. The leather suitcase was fastened to his luggage rack, and a spare fuel can was secured atop it.

Next to it stood the girl.

She wore a black jacket, black pants, and a thick belt around her waist. Multiple pouches hung from her belt, and a large-caliber revolver was holstered over her right thigh.

The girl tied up her hair into a long ponytail and tucked it into her jacket. She put on her cap with ear flaps and hung the silver-framed goggles around her neck.

The old woman came outside and said something to her.

The girl gave a determined nod.

"I'll be going now."

She put on her goggles. The girl climbed atop Hermes and raised the stand. Slowly, she rode him down onto the road.

Then she turned and set off.

The motorrad made its way down the lone road through the woods.

The road was flattened solid and seemed to go on forever into the distance. The forest continued to the horizon with the road, and the sliver of sky over them was the color of lead.

"Hey, slow down!" Hermes cried.

"Why?" the girl asked tersely.

"It's not that far. You don't have to go this fast to reach the place by afternoon."

"But we're doing just fine."

"For now, but we'll be in trouble if the road suddenly gets bumpy."

"Okay..."

"And you'll tire yourself out if you go too fast. Slow down so you won't

collapse before you get there.”

“All right...”

The motorrad slowed. Hermes breathed a sigh of relief. “Say, Kino?”

There was no answer.

“Kino?”

Still no answer.

“Hey.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. What is it?” the girl asked, finally responding.

“I was curious, what are you going to do once you get there? That’s the most important part, but you haven’t said anything about it.”

For a time, the girl said nothing. They simply continued down the road, the trees passing quickly by. The unchanging landscape made it seem like the motorrad was still and the world was moving around them.

Finally, the girl said, “I’m really not Kino...”

“Huh?”

“I’m not Kino. I can’t bring myself to think that way. It’s like Kino isn’t me. So I’m going to go...go to Kino’s hometown, and...”

“And?”

“And I’m going to meet his family, or at least the people who knew him, and...”

“And what are you going to do?”

Slowly, the girl raised her head. And she looked up at the darkening skies above.

“I’m going to apologize,” she said, her eyes back on the road.

“Wouldn’t it be enough just to tell them what happened?” Hermes suggested. “You have to explain how it turned out that way.”

“I will. And then I’ll apologize. So I have to go...”

“Really? By the way, could we take a break for a bit? You haven’t stopped once since we left—all this shaking’s going to make your arms and legs really tired.”

“I’m okay.”

The motorrad continued down the lone road in the woods.

The girl continued without stopping until lunchtime.

The girl parked Hermes on the roadside.

The menu that day was bread. She poured a small bottle of honey over it and mechanically munched on her food. She brought her water bottle to her mouth when Hermes nagged, “I thought I told you to only drink boiled water.”

The girl had no choice but to build a fire with solid fuel and brew tea over it.

She finished her meal with scarcely a word, put on her hat and goggles, and continued down the deserted road.

The forest reflected in her goggles glided from the center to the sides. The motorrad continued on its way.

The overcast sky concealed the sun and robbed her of her sense of time.

“There’s no rush. It’s still only afternoon teatime,” Hermes said reassuringly, and urged the girl to look at the western sky. A piece of the blue sky was peering out through the clouds. “It’ll clear up soon. You’re not going to get rained on.”

The girl said nothing. She simply kept her right hand clenched around the gas lever.

The motorrad eventually reached a rampart in the forest.

“This must be it,” said Hermes. The girl stepped off and raised her goggles without a word.

The walls of the country were the same color as the forest around it. The narrow curve suggested it was not a very large country. Ivy curled its way up to the top of the walls, lending it the look of a decrepit ruin.

Slowly, the girl took off her hat and goggles. She pulled out her ponytail and



let it hang over her jacket. And she looked up at the walls before her in silence.

Two gatekeepers came out of the guardhouse by the gates. One was a man in late middle-age, and the other was a young man aged about twenty years. Both had old rifles slung behind their backs.

“Er, are you a traveler? Are you looking to enter our country?”

The girl said nothing, so Hermes answered for her. “That’s right.”

“Er...I...you see...” the girl stammered, as the gatekeepers stared in confusion, “I...I mean...is this...”

Without warning, she leapt to the suitcase on Hermes. The gatekeepers watched, shocked, as she heaved the suitcase off the luggage rack and took out a neatly folded brown coat.

“I...I think this belongs to someone from this country...” she said, holding it out to the gatekeepers.

The older gatekeeper took the coat curiously. “May I have a look at it?”

The girl nodded.

The gatekeeper opened up the coat. “Yes, this is from our country. Let’s see here...” he checked the inner pocket. “Ah, here’s the registration number. 48402-15855. Who could it be? Go check the records.”

The younger gatekeeper recited the numbers under his breath as he returned to the guardhouse. A moment later, he came out with a thick bundle of documents. “48402-15855. Yes, it’s here. Left through these very gates four years ago. His name is—”

“Kino!” the girl cried. One of the gatekeepers flinched at the sound of her voice, and the other at the name. “Yes... His name really is Kino.”

The gatekeepers stared. The older man, trying not to upset the girl, asked, “May I ask where you found this coat?”

The girl did not answer the question. “Does he have family here? May I meet them? Please!”

This time, the gatekeepers flinched not at her words, but the tears streaming

down her face.

Dozens of people packed the humble plaza just inside the gates. The rumors had somehow spread to people on their way home from their farms and workplaces, bringing them there to whisper about the incoming visitor.

“Do they have nothing better to do?” the older gatekeeper sighed from the guardhouse.

The girl was sitting stiffly, with her motorrad next to her.

“I’ve let his family know,” said the gatekeeper. “But could you at least tell me what happened, Missy? I promise that no one else will know.”

The girl gave a slight shake of the head.

Afternoon was half-over, and the clouds gave way to the sky. The carpet of grey made room for the blue beyond.

A truck approached the plaza. It was a small model for use on farms. A middle-aged woman and an old man stepped off, pushed their way through the crowds, and entered the guardhouse. The girl scrambled to her feet.

“It’s all right, dear,” said the woman, “I’m not Kino’s family. I was asked to pick you up.”

“By who?”

“His mother—his only family. Will you come see her?”

The girl nodded. The gatekeeper asked the old man if this was all right.

“Don’t worry, now. She’s not going to bite,” the old man replied, “So give the girl permission to enter, you hear? She’s now officially a guest to our country.”

They secured Hermes to the back of the truck.

“I wonder what’s going on?” he wondered, as though the situation was none of his business.

The truck made its way down a dirt path that ran through a farmland.

The girl sat in the passenger seat in utter silence, coat over her lap.

They stopped at a small town, where the houses were made of wood and

placed sparsely with trees in between them.

Once everyone was off the truck, the old man asked Hermes, "Will you wait here? It's honestly a bit of a hassle taking you down and getting you up again."

"Ask her," Hermes replied. The old man nodded and asked the girl. "Well? The truck's not going anywhere. He'll be fine."

"As long as Hermes is okay with it."

"All right."

They left Hermes in the back of the truck and went to one of the houses. The door opened into a dim room.

The living room was deserted. Inside was a small table with two chairs, and a cold fireplace.

The girl took off her cap and put her goggles inside, carrying it under the coat.

"We're here," said the middle-aged woman.

A female voice answered from further inside, "One minute, please."

The girl's grip on her cap tightened.

A woman came out of one of the rooms.

She was in her late forties or early fifties, plump and wearing a green dress with an apron, and a pair of round glasses.

The woman smiled at the girl. "You must be the darling little traveler who knows my son."

"...Yes."

"And what might be your name?"

"It's ———."

"It's nice to meet you, ———."

The woman offered her a chair. She waited for the girl to sit down with the coat over her lap before taking a seat herself.

"What would you like us to do?" asked the old man.

The woman replied, "Could you give us some time alone? I'll call you back if I need you."

The pair who drove the girl to the house went to the door.

The door closed shut, and the room fell into silence. Some time passed before the girl finally spoke.

"Er... Here! This is for you!" she cried, placing the neatly-folded coat on the table.

The woman picked it up, and slowly read the numbers printed on the inner pocket. "This really is his number. This is Kino's coat... Tell me, sweetie. Where did you find it?"

"I'll tell you everything! Please listen!" the girl cried, practically leaping from her chair.

"...Of course," the woman said with a gentle nod. "But do wipe those tears, now."

As the girl desperately recounted her story, the wind drove away the clouds and the setting sun emerged. Dusk came over the green-and-brown plains and the cottages dotted around them. A reddish light and orange glow filled the living room.

"I see. So that's what happened," the woman whispered.

The girl apologized slowly, then again and again and again.

"Thank you for coming all this way to tell me, sweetie," the woman said, betraying no hint of emotion, "I'd almost given up when I stopped hearing from him. I'd suspected he wasn't with us any more when I saw the coat."

"I'm so sorry," the girl said again, her little head bowed low.

"Don't blame yourself, dear. It's not your fault."

"But still... I'm sorry. If only I didn't tell my parents I didn't want the operation..."

"Then you would have been a different person completely."

"But... Kino would still be alive. He didn't do anything wrong. If only I'd had

my birthday like everyone else...”

“You know,” said the woman, her tone growing casual, “He always said he loved traveling. He said seeing different countries would help him and our country grow. He would take off and came back, and then take off in the blink of an eye again. Once he’d become an adult, he was barely ever here.”

The girl said nothing.

“So every time he left, I would wonder to myself, ‘Will I ever see him again?’ as I waited.”

The girl said nothing.

“Could you tell me just one thing, sweetie?”

The girl looked up, her face half-wrinkled in sobs and half-soulless. And she whispered, “Yes.”

The woman asked, “Do you have a place to call home now?”

“Huh? Yes, but...”

“Then that’s more than enough, sweetie. It’s a blessing to have a place to go back to. But it’s getting late today, so I think you should stay the night in our country. Let me get you some tea.”

The woman went to the kitchen next to the living room.

“Er...”

It took the girl a moment to rise and offer to help.

“It’s all right, dear. I can take care of things here. Sit down and get some rest,” the woman replied from the kitchen.

For a time, the crackling of fire, the boiling of water, and sound of water being poured into a teapot were the only noises in the house.

The room was dyed red in the sunset. The girl sat fiddling with the coat.

She put her hands on her lap, and recoiled.

There was something cold under the right hand. She slowly looked down at the object.

The loaded persuader was holstered over her thigh. It was glinting black, all too real in the light of the setting sun.

The girl put her right hand on her knee, avoiding the persuader.

“Here you are.”

Two steaming cups of tea were placed on the table. The woman took Kino’s coat and stepped into one of the rooms, before coming back and serving one of the cups to the girl. Then she took a seat herself.

The girl took the cup with both hands and drank.

“It’s not too hot for you, I hope?”

Two gulps later, the girl replied that the tea was fine. She took another sip.

“You must have been thirsty,” said the woman. The girl had downed half her tea in one go.

Slowly and quietly, the girl exhaled. “It’s really good.”

The woman thanked the girl.

The girl put down her cup.

“Huh...?”

She saw the world turn on its side.

She heard her body hit the floor. And the chair as well.

The girl lost her balance and fell shoulder-first to her left, still in her chair. The cup hit her right hand and spilled onto the table, before rolling off and landing next to her face with a clatter. The girl’s ponytail came undone, spilling across the floor.

“Huh...? Huh...?” she groaned, looking up at the dancing ceiling.

The woman’s face came into view in the red light. She held out her arms, looking down at the girl.

“Huh...?”

The arms seemed to undulate as they came closer and closer to her neck.

“It’s all your fault...”

The girl could hear the woman's voice clearly. And feel the cold hands wrapping around her neck.

"It's all your fault my son is dead."

The hands tightened around her neck.

The girl could do little but scream softly.

"He'd be home safe if it weren't for you. Kino would have come home. Kino would still be *alive* right now."

The girl could not see what face the woman atop her was making. All she saw was a black mass.

The floor was dyed a stark red. The woman was choking her as she lay helplessly, hair spilling around her.

"What would you know about my pain? You have no idea what it's like to be a mother losing a son. To have to wait forever for someone who will never return."

The girl could not say a word.

"It's all your fault!"

The woman's grip tightened more.

Nothing escaped the girl's lips; no sound, no breath. Only her hands reached up and fell limp. Trembling, they reached up again and fell back down. That was when her right hand fell on something cold.

It took hold of the object. The girl pulled with her right hand, and the holster came open and a glinting black cylinder and barrel emerged.

The woman's mouth opened wide. And slowly, decisively, she said:

"It's all your fault Kino hasn't come home."

And again:

"It's all your fault Kino hasn't— Gah!"

The long barrel of the revolver was pushed into her throat. It trembled in time with the girl's hands. Each time she shook, the barrel clattered against the

woman's teeth.

The woman's grip weakened. The girl took a shallow breath and said—  
“I'm Kino now... I am Kino...”

The clattering stopped.

“I...I can't...die again...”

*BANG.*

The world was dyed a deep red.

A person recoiled as though having been shocked. And landed on top of the silent person lying on the wooden floor.

The world was dyed a deep red.

One person lay unconscious on the floor. Another lay dead on top of her.

Blood spilled from the dead into the hair of the other.

The world was dyed a deep red. The blood pooling on the ground was even darker.

The sun set past the forest and the walls, and the room was dark.

A pair of eyes were peering through the window into the dead-still room.

The next morning, Kino rose at dawn.

She opened her eyes and slowly sat up. A cozy blanket slid off her chest. Kino realized that she was in clean, white clothes.

“Good morning.”

Kino turned to the voice. Hermes was propped up there on his center stand.

“Oh. Hello, Hermes,” Kino replied, and looked to her left. She saw the wall of a log cabin. Morning sunlight spilled in through the window in the wall.

Kino looked to her right. She was in a small room furnished with a plain desk, chair, and closet. On the desk was a freshly-laundered button-up shirt, a pair of boots, a holstered persuader, and a cap and goggles.

A black jacket and a pair of pants hung neatly in the closet.



“Where am I?” Kino asked in a daze.

The answer came from outside. “Still in the same country. This is my house.” The middle-aged woman who had picked up Kino the day before entered the room. “It’s the day after you came to our country. How do you feel? You’re not dizzy? Your arms and legs aren’t numb?” she asked, as casual as she had been the previous day.

Kino shook her head. The middle-aged woman nodded.

For some time, Kino sat blankly in bed, eyes wide. Each time she breathed, her slender shoulders slowly rose and fell.

And finally—

“What happened to her?” she asked.

“We gave her a funeral and burial last night,” the middle-aged woman replied. She told Kino to get changed and wait in the room.

Kino stepped out of bed and looked down at her clothes. There wasn’t a single stain to be found.

She dressed herself exactly as she had the previous day. She put on her black jacket, the belt, and the holster. A small droplet of something dark had dried on the black revolver. There were five shots left.

Kino reached over to pull her hair out of her jacket.

She realized that there was nothing to pull out.

“There’s a mirror in the closet,” said Hermes.

Kino took three tender steps and stood before the mirror. She saw a person with short black hair.

She stared at the person for some time. Soon, the person spoke.

“Kino. My name is Kino—”

“Hello, Kino.”

At that moment, the door opened and the middle-aged woman stepped inside with the old man from the previous day.

"I'm sorry about your hair," said the old man. "There was so much blood in it that I asked her to cut it. Does it bother you?"

Kino turned to the old man and replied, "No."

"That's good to hear. Please, take a seat."

Kino sat on the edge of the bed, and the pair brought over stools from a corner of the room.

"Now, where should I begin?" asked the old man.

Kino replied, "Er...what's going to happen to me now?"

"Self-defense is not a crime in our country," said the old man, "but turning a blind eye to suicide is a heavy one. The punishment is exile. Do you understand?"

Kino nodded, understanding the implication. "Yes. But...why?"

The old man responded, his voice overlapping with the chirping of birds in the background. "There are too many naively kind people in this country. One young man got sick of it all and took off constantly. Although it seems like he never fully escaped that himself, in the end."

Kino was silent.

"Let me go back to the point," said the old man, "She'd been waiting all alone for a very long time. Do you know how it feels? For a mother to wait forever for her son's return?"

"No," Kino replied immediately.

"That's all right," the old man said with a nod. "But she must have been so relieved, knowing she didn't have to wait anymore. It must have given her so much comfort to finally know. She must have known what it meant to attack someone who was armed with a persuader, even if that person was drugged."

Kino was silent.

"Do you understand?"

Kino shook her head. "No, I don't."

"I suppose that's reasonable. And that's all right. But there's just one thing I

want you to know.”

“What is it?”

The old man replied, “That you don’t need to shed tears over this anymore. It’s all over.”

“We’ll take care of the rest. You go on back to where you’re supposed to be. We’ve spoken to the gatekeepers who met you on the way in—you just have to take the same way back home.”

Kino pushed Hermes out of the room. She walked out of the living room and into the street, where a pale blue sky greeted them. The morning mist quietly floated and faded out of view.

Kino took a deep, quiet breath.

The middle-aged woman handed her something. “Here you are, Kino.”

A neatly-folded brown coat. The one Kino had brought into the country.

“She left me this,” said the woman, “with a note. Saying not to bury it with her, but to give it to you. It was a birthday gift for her son a long time ago. And now...it’s yours.”

Without a word, Kino propped up Hermes on his center stand and received the coat.

She put on the coat and buttoned it up. The edges almost dragged on the ground.

“It’s a little long,” the old man remarked.

“It is,” Kino said.

That day, the gatekeepers sent off a traveler in the early hours of the morning.

The traveler was traveling by motorrad, wearing a long brown coat with the edges wrapped around her thighs.

One of the gatekeepers watched the traveler race into the woods, and looked up at the sky with a stretch. Then he returned to the guardhouse.

Above the vast green forest and the ramparts, the morning mist cleared to

reveal an endless blue sky.

**-Continued in Volume VIII-**

(1) As a child, Kino refers to herself with the gender-neutral first-person pronoun *watashi* (私). However, the previous Kino (and Kino herself, in the main series) refers to himself with the masculine first-person pronoun *boku* (僕).



